

**THE *DISTRIBUTED AUTHOR* AND THE *POETICS OF COMPLEXITY*:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS
AND SERBIAN EPIC POETRY**

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To my dear grandfather, Stojan Svilar,
who wanted me to be a 'proper doctor'
but kept half-telling, half-reciting
The Wedding of Tsar Dušan at bedtime.

Svome dragom dedi, Stojanu Svilaru,
koji je želeo da budem 'pravi doktor',
ali mi je pola pričao, pola recitovao
Ženidbu cara Dušana pred spavanje.

Abstract

The thesis brings together *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme*, two historically and culturally unrelated heroic literatures, literatures that had, nevertheless, converged upon a similar kind of realism. This feature in which they diverge from the earlier European epics – *Beowulf*, *Nibelungenlied*, *La Chanson de Roland*, is the focal point of this study. Rather than examining it solely in terms of verisimilitude and historicism with which it is commonly associated, I am approaching it as an emergent feature (*emergent realism*) of the non-linear, evolutionary dynamics of their production (i.e. their networked, negotiated authorship), the dynamics I call the *distributed author*.

Although all traditional narratives develop in accordance with this dynamics, their non-linearity is often compromised by Bakhtinian ‘centripetal forces’ (e.g. centralised state, Church) with an effect of directedness akin to the authorial agency of an individual. The peculiar weakness of such forces in the milieus in which the sagas/Serbian epics grew, encouraged their distributed nature. As a result, they come across as indexes of their own coming into being, preserving, meshing and contrasting the old and the new, the general and the more idiosyncratic perspectives on past events and characters. In so doing they fail to arouse in the recipient the feeling of being addressed and possibly manipulated by an all-encompassing organising authority. As a consequence, they also impress as believable.

While chapters one and two of this study deal with theoretical and aesthetic implications of the two literatures’ distributed authorship and their emergent realism, chapters three and four illustrate the ways in which these are manifested in the rich texture of the past and the complex make-up of the characters. The final chapter summarises major points of the thesis and suggests the *poetics of complexity* as a term particularly suitable to encapsulate the two literatures’ common creative principles.

Acknowledgements

As much as each discovery owes a bit to serendipity and requires a concentrated effort of an individual, for it to move beyond the fleeting ‘aha’ effect and private wallowing into something worth sharing, a network of people has to be involved. My supervisors, Professor Judith Jesch and Dr. David Norris, have offered guidance and support beyond the call of duty. With the benefit of Judith’s eye for detail and David’s attention to the larger scheme of things, any faults that remain with the thesis are my own. My thanks are also due to Professor Andrew Wawn of the University of Leeds for indulging my initial enthusiasm for a comparative study of the two literatures, and to Torfi H. Tulinius for an inspiration for the title of the thesis. To my husband, Miloš Ranković, I am much grateful for introducing me to the complexity theory and making me aware of the difference between the computational and communicational investments in an artwork. Miloš has often engaged me in the most challenging discussions and offered plenty of emotional support at times when he might have needed it himself. Finally, I thank my children, Katarina and Marko, for ceaselessly motivating and inspiring me, as well as being a reassuring reminder of the fact that whatever (whomever) one assumes to have authored is, after all, bound to acquire a life of its own.

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Preface

Fresh after revelling in Beowulf's fierce combat with Grendel, his descent into the mire and the bloodcurdling encounter with the fiend's mother, after pondering with fellow students at Leeds his tragic last stand against the dragon, I was much surprised when our very next medieval literature class turned out to be dedicated to an Icelandic story in which two heroes appear more inclined to flee than fight one another.

Unable to tolerate his old Viking father's sardonic jabs any longer, the otherwise even-tempered Þorsteinn kills Þórðr, the man who had earned him the shameful nickname of Staff-struck. Bjarni of Hof, with whom the responsibility to avenge his housecarl (Þórðr) rests is, however, not too easily moved into action. He successfully resists the provocations of his two scoundrel servants, but it is his wife's nagging that he cannot ignore and he finally sets off to meet Þorsteinn. What complicates this situation further is the fact that the two men respect and fear each other. Bjarni is too old to fight duels and Þorsteinn is unwilling to draw the wrath of Bjarni's many powerful relatives, all for the sake of an overbearing troublemaker whom nobody liked anyway. The heroes find themselves caught between the rigidity of the inherited heroic code that commands vengeance regardless of the absurdity of the situation, and their loyalty and reverence for this same code. The result is the most unlikely duel:

And when they had fought for a very long time, Bjarni said to Thorstein, 'I'm thirsty now, for I am less used to hard work than you are.'

'Then go to the brook,' said Thorstein, 'and drink'. [...]

'A lot is going wrong for me today,' said Bjarni; 'Now my shoelace has come untied.' [...]

Then Bjarni chopped Thorstein's entire shield away from him, and Thorstein chopped Bjarni's away from him.

'Now you're swinging,' said Bjarni.
 Thorstein answered, 'You did not deal a lighter blow.'
 Bjarni said, 'The same weapon you had earlier today is biting harder for you now.'
 Thorstein said, 'I would save myself from a mishap if I could and I fight in fear of you. I am still willing to submit entirely to your judgement.'¹

[Ok þá er þeir höfðu mjök lengi barizk, þá mælti Bjarni til Þorsteins: "Þyrstir mik nú, því at ek em óvanari erfiðinu en þú." "Gakk þú þá til lækjarins," sagði Þorsteinn, "ok drekk." [...] "Margt hendir mik nú í dag," sagði Bjarni. "Lauss er nú skópvengr minn." [...] Þá hogggr Bjarni allan skjöldinn af Þorsteini, en þá hjó Þorsteinn skjöldinn af Bjarna. "Stórt er nú höggvit," kvað Bjarni. Þorsteinn svaraði: "Ekki hjóttu smæra högg." Bjarni mælti: "Betr bítr þér nú it sama vápnit, er þú hefir áðr í dag haft." Þorsteinn mælti: "Spara munda ek við mik óhapp, ef ek mætta svá gera, ok berjumk ek hræddr við þik. Vilda ek enn allt á þínu valdi vera láta."]²

The scene ends in the agreement that, as a form of atonement, Þorsteinn should take Þórðr's place in Bjarni's household. And so the matter is settled with no further blood spilt, and no honour stained.

What struck me about this duel (as hard, I am tempted to say, as Þórðr's staff did our hero) was that in its curious divergence from the familiar heroic ideal (encountered in *Beowulf* and other great European epics – *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, *La Chanson de Roland*, etc.) it remarkably resembles the duel of Marko Kraljević and Bogdan the Fierce, two heroes from another literature of the European margins, a literature I knew simply by being born into it – that of the Serbs.

As they draw dangerously close on their journey to the lands of Bogdan the Fierce, Marko warns his blood-brothers, Miloš and Relja, not to ride through Bogdan's vineyards and relates a story of his previous encounter with this valiant warrior in which he barely escaped with his life. The two reproach him in the manner of the heroic code, saying that it is better to die than run in fear. Marko has no choice

¹ *The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck in*: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Anthony Maxwell, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, pp. 681-682.

² *Þorsteinn þátr stangarhöggs in: Austfirðinga sögur*. Jón Jóhannesson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit, 1950, Vol. XI, pp. 75-76. Here, as in other places in this study, 'ö' stands for the 'hooked o'. See 'A note on spelling and other conventions', p. ix.

other than to succumb, but when the infuriated Bogdan arrives with his twelve retainers, he offers his two blood-brothers a choice: either they could take on Bogdan alone, or they could attack his twelve men. Forgetting their former boasting, the two of them, rather unheroically, decide to fight Bogdan alone, but he proves to be a tougher choice. He deals with them as easily (captures them) as Marko does with the twelve retainers. Now, after the dynamic action in which both heroes show themselves worthy and skilled warriors, Marko and Bogdan are finally left alone, looking at each other:

Bogdan stood at the vineyard's edge,
When he took in Marko's black eyes,
The warlike glare in them,
Bogdan's legs froze underneath him.
Marko is looking at Bogdan the Fierce,
Bogdan is looking at Kraljević Marko.
None dares make a move on the other;
A long while later, spoke Bogdan the Fierce:
'Come, Marko, let's make up:
Release my twelve retainers,
And I'll let Relja and Miloš go.'
Marko could hardly wait to hear this [...]
They sat and started drinking red wine...

[Стаде Богдан украј винограда,
Кад сагледа црне очи Марку,
И какав је на очима Марко,
Под Богданом ноге обамреше.
Гледа Марко Љутицу Богдана,
Богдан гледа Краљевића Марка,
А не смије један на другога;
Доцкан рече Љутица Богдане:
"Ходи, Марко, да се помиримо:
Пустите мене дванаест војвода,
Да ти пустим Рељу и Милоша."
То је Марко једва дочекао, [...]
Пак сједоше пити рујно вино...]³

Untied shoelaces and blunt swords, staring contests and shaky legs, stalling for time, hesitancy, and purely pragmatic concerns hardly go hand in hand with the heroic

³ *Марко Краљевић и Љутица Богдан in: Караџић, Вук Стефановић, ed. Српске народне пјесме. Vol. II, Београд: Просвета, 1976, pp. 163-164.*

yarn, yet despite their humorous scenes, the two narratives are not mock-heroics either: Þorsteinn and Bjarni, Marko and Bogdan all remain heroes – unusual heroes, comical at times to be sure, but still unscathed by sarcasm. How come? And how come they are all similar precisely in the way they are unusual, in the way they do not conform to the heroic model? A common influence? A historic accident? A coincidence? Any more coincidences? Common patterns?

The curiosity that this serendipitous meeting of Marko and Þorsteinn had spurred led to a BA dissertation and an MA study that revealed many other common characteristics of the two literatures, the characteristics that, without an apparent awareness of each other's fields, both Old Norse and South-Slavic academic communities claimed as unique qualities of the *Íslendingasögur*⁴/ *srpske junačke pesme*.⁵ Unsurprisingly perhaps, the focus of my MA thesis was on characterisation in the two literatures. It was envisaged not so much as a comparative survey of characters as an attempt to gauge the sagas' and Serbian epic poems' shared underlying creative currents and principal ideologies as reflected in characterisation. The study also suggested the possibility of an evolutionary trend, a trend emerging from the specific nature of the sociopolitical circumstances that had made heroic literature acutely relevant to the two cultures for a prolonged period of time, long after what is known as the 'Heroic Age' had passed for the rest of the Europe. In essence, this trend reflects increasing acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of social and historical realities; it manifests itself as that realism for which the two literatures are lauded in both scholarly camps. The scope of the present study allows for a more thorough exploration of this trend, a wider consideration of the makeup of the sagas' and Serbian epics' realism. In accordance with this shift of focus,

⁴ The sagas of Icelanders

⁵ Serbian heroic songs

characterisation is here allotted one chapter (chapter 4). Throughout it I make free use of the material from the MA thesis, but with the adjustments responsive to the demands of the present format, as well as new insights that the further years of study have brought into play.

A note on choice (and translation) of the material examined

Before setting off to explore the aforementioned questions, I would like to briefly elucidate my choice of the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems that are going to be considered here. Bearing in mind that this is a comparative study, I am anxious to examine a wide range of both sets of texts, but not necessarily every piece of work in the respective corpora, as this would be unnecessary in respect to the points argued, and unjustifiably tedious.

As is customary, original saga quotations will be supplied from the Íslensk fornrit editions. Regarding translations, I will mainly rely on *The Sagas of Icelanders* anthology – both for convenience (wider availability), and because it contains the same excellent translations as *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. However, although the anthology offers different types of sagas (poets and warriors, outlaws, regional feuds, champions...), it does not contain such classics as *Grettis saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* without which, I feel, the study would be incomplete. Translations of these sagas will therefore be cited from the Vols. II and III of the aforementioned *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. It also needs to be noted that, unless otherwise specified, shorter terms such as ‘Icelandic sagas’ or simply ‘the sagas’ will throughout this study refer to the sagas of Icelanders (rather than, for example, the ‘kings’ sagas’, or ‘bishops’ sagas’).

As regards Serbian epic poems, it is the collections of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (Vols. II-IV) that I am going to focus on, since, as Robert Auty notes, these represent ‘the most valuable specimens [...] from the aesthetic point of view’.⁶ However, I will also occasionally refer to other collections (e.g. the eighteenth-century *Erlangen Manuscript*) as well as the cognate traditions (that of the earlier sixteen-syllable epic poems – *bugarštice*, and decasyllabic Bosnian Muslim epics) by way of comparison. As with the sagas, I am eager to look into a variety of poems – those that Vuk calls ‘the oldest’, (the poems of the feudal lords, battle of Kosovo, the subsequent life in vassalage and the cycle of poems about Marko Kraljević), as well as those of ‘intermediate times’ (poems about outlaws) and those of ‘more recent times’ (poems that deal with Serbian Insurrections). Unless otherwise stated, the translations of Serbian epic poems (and other texts in Serbian) are mine.

A note on spelling and other conventions

Icelandic:

- Throughout the study Icelandic character ‘ö’ is used as a substitute for the so-called ‘hooked o’ (‘o’).
- As is customary, Icelandic names are cited (both in the footnotes and bibliography) with the first name first, followed by a patronymic or a surname.
- In the main body of the text, Icelandic names are either given in full (rather than just a surname or a patronymic being quoted), or, if the same name appears many times in the same paragraph, it is substituted for the initials of a person in question.

⁶ Auty, Robert. ‘Serbo-Croat’ in: Hatto, Arthur T., ed. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*. London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1980, p. 196.

Serbian:

- While in the main body of the text Serbian names will be given in Latin script, in the footnotes and bibliography, they will be cited as they appear in original publications – in either Latin or Cyrillic.
 - Names in Cyrillic are listed in the bibliography according to the Latin alphabet in places where they would normally appear if transcribed.
- Surnames beginning with characters with diacritic signs, such as ‘ć’, ‘č’, ‘đ’, ‘š’ and ‘ž’ are listed according to the Serbian/Croatian Latin alphabet – ‘ć’ and ‘č’ after ‘c’, ‘đ’ after ‘d’, ‘š’ after ‘s’, and ‘ž’ after ‘z’.

I

Serbian Epic Poems and the Sagas of Icelanders: on Common Patterns Emerging

Icelanders and Serbs, two little peoples from the opposite corners of Europe, hanging on its North-Western and South-Eastern margins, peoples with different histories and different cultures, with very distinct modes of artistic expression, converge nevertheless in the way their *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme* differ from the earlier medieval European epics such as *Beowulf*, *The Nibelungenlied*, *La Chanson de Roland*. Different as the two countries' geography is, and unrelated as their histories are, they still worked in similar ways: they afforded a certain amount of isolation, infused with the threat of cultural assimilation – an environment friendly to the heroic literature that had continued to thrive there centuries after it went out of fashion for the rest of the Europe. But this state of affairs does not necessarily imply cultural stasis. On the contrary: it has given rise to a set of features which both Old Norse and South Slavic academic communities consider idiosyncratic of their respective cultures and opened up a space within which it was possible for the realism, that is again supposedly unique to the sagas/Serbian epics, to arise. Indeed, both Theodore Andersson¹ and Jovan Brkić² (each in his own way) describe the changes that the heroic ideal underwent in the sagas/Serbian epics in terms of the democratisation of honour. Just as Peter Foote points to the sagas' 'unique blend of pagan inheritance and Christian acquisition',³ so does Svetozar Koljević note that it

¹ Andersson, Theodore M. 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas, *Speculum*, 1970, 45, pp. 575 - 593.

² Brkić, Jovan. *Moral Concepts in Traditional Serbian Epic Poetry*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1961.

³ Foote, Peter. 'An Essay on the saga of Gisli' in: Johnston, George, transl. *The Saga of Gisli*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1963, p. 99.

is ‘the different social and spiritual settings of pagan and Christian, feudal and village life’ that ‘gives the Serbo-Croat oral epic material its unique interest’.⁴ And while Jane Smiley iterates that ‘typical saga style bespeaks of an agricultural world’,⁵ and Robert Kellogg perceives the sagas as ‘a narrative art which aspires to counterfeit reality’,⁶ Mary Coote argues that ‘the involvement of heroic songs with daily life gives them the air of realism and historicity that distinguishes the Serbocroatian heroic songs from other traditions’.⁷ Apparently, a good number of qualities that distinguish *Íslendingasögur* are also the qualities that distinguish Serbian epic poems from other European heroic traditions. The present study aims to explore these qualities, especially the nature of the famed realism, its immanent poetics and the common creative undercurrents of the two literatures. It will also propose that the sagas’ and Serbian epics’ brand of realism constitutes an evolutionary trend within the epic genre.

Before immersing ourselves in these questions, however, the premises upon which this comparative study rests need to be addressed. These fall into two broad categories and will therefore be dealt with in separate sections. The first one will consider the terms under which it becomes possible to observe in comparison these two otherwise very different literatures, and the second will delineate the boundaries and set an appropriate context within which the notoriously elusive and semantically loaded term *realism* is to be used.

⁴ Koljević, Svetozar. *The Epic in the Making*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, p. vii.

⁵ Smiley, Jane. ‘Preface’ in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. London: Penguin, 2000, p. xi.

⁶ Kellogg, Robert. ‘Introduction’ in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas*, p. xxix.

⁷ Coote, Mary. ‘Serbocroatian Heroic Songs’ in: Oinas, Felix, ed. *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World’s Great Folk Epics*. Bloomington USA and London: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 261.

1.1 Preliminary Questions – Initial Conditions

When considering the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry, the differences are more conspicuous than the shared features and the purpose of the following sections is not to try and annihilate them (if such a thing is possible at all), but to set the appropriate conditions for exploration and put the two literatures onto an equal footing, so to speak. In particular, in this section I would like to address their generic comparability, chronological discrepancies and consider their oral-literary relationships.

1.1.1 Generic comparability

a) Of labels, essences and family resemblances

Upon reading the very first sentence of the introduction, it becomes immediately apparent that the texts I mention all in one breath and under the general label of epic or heroic literature form a rather motley crew, a crew that, to be sure, seems to find itself together in discussions of the epic often enough,⁸ but whose generic compatibility is still hardly a matter of course. What J.B. Hainsworth notes for the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, also applies to the medieval epics considered here: these texts ‘are not attempts with varying success at the same form, but different forms of epic’.⁹ The attraction of such an approach lies in the recognition that subsuming different works under the same generic label need not be an attempt to destroy their individuality and neither does it rest upon the presumption that the

⁸ See for example: Ker, W. P. *Epic and Romance. Essays on Medieval Literature*. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1931; Chadwick, Henry M. *The Heroic Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926; Bowra, C. M. *Heroic Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1966; or more recently: Hatto, Arthur T., ed. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*. London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1980; Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁹ Hainsworth, J.B. *The Idea of Epic*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, p. 4.

label embodies an essence with which all these works are endowed. As Jeremy Downes observes, ‘vastly different media and contexts of production, transmission, and reception disallow any epic “essence.”’¹⁰ Rather, Hainsworth’s stance seems to share affinities with Wittgenstein’s concept of *family resemblances* as ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail’.¹¹ While *The Song of Roland*, *Beowulf*, *Nibelungelied*, *srpske junačke pesme* and the *Íslendingasögur* are each undoubtedly something *sui generis* (the long history of epic inevitably results in a break up of the form into subgenres),¹² they at the same time share many more family resemblances with each other than they do with Shakespeare’s sonnets or Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. Observed in broader generic terms, terms which, as Northrop Frye points out, we ‘derived from the Greeks’ (lyric, epic and drama),¹³ being concerned with narration, the mentioned works all belong to the same group – epic. Moreover, they all exhibit ‘a certain idea of heroic action’¹⁴ and are ‘artistic expressions of the survival myth of the nation’,¹⁵ which Hainsworth deems important epic qualities, or, to go with Wittgenstein’s model, reinforced connections¹⁶ between various kinds of nodes (discrete works) within the epic similarities network. The texts under scrutiny here are further bound by the fact that they are all traditional narratives (oral, or orally-derived, rooted in oral tradition) and are either created during the Middle

¹⁰ Downes, Jeremy M. *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1997, p. 245.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963, p. 32.

¹² Hainsworth, *Epic*, p. 5.

¹³ Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 246. The ‘seductive triad’ of lyric, epic and drama represents, Gérard Genette shows, a conflation of Plato’s and Aristotle’s genre theories. But even as such, it has, David Duff argues, ‘contributed greatly to our understanding of the phenomenon of genre’. See Duff, David, ed. *Modern Genre Theory*. London: Longman, 2000, p. 3.

¹⁴ Hainsworth, *Epic*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁶ The brain can serve here as a network model *par excellence*. Connections between the innumerable nerve cells (‘nodes’) that comprise a brain do not have the same weight. Some become stronger, *reinforced* through more frequent use, depending on the demands posed (or opportunities afforded) by the environment.

Ages, or, in the case of Serbian epic songs, within the patriarchal/feudal milieu and with largely medieval subject matter.

With these similarities in mind, the sagas of Icelanders as prose narratives might still impress as the odd one out within this group that consists of narratives in verse and ‘*sung tales*’. Without the intention to slight the aesthetic impact of narration in prose or verse, in the present terms of compatibility, it is important to note that the verse/prose difference is in itself a very dubious generic marker. While Northrop Frye insists that “‘epic’ material does not have to be in metre”,¹⁷ Claudio Guillén reminds us: ‘Aristotle already emphasised that the only thing that Homer and Empedocles had in common was that they wrote in verse’.¹⁸ (The verses of the former were epic poetry, and those of the latter constituted scientific tracts.) Indeed, Kellogg and Scholes note that ‘in some respects, the family sagas are epic poems in prose’.¹⁹ They are, however, also quick to add that the sagas’ ‘curtailment of myth and emphasis on mimesis is so nearly complete as to be at times more suggestive of the novel than the epic’.²⁰ The radical curtailment of myth and emphasis on the mimetic is something that, we have seen above, Serbian epic poems are ascribed as well, even though they are not narratives in prose, let alone suggestive of the novel.²¹

b) But can the epic sustain laughter?

Carol Clover, on the other hand, rejects the sagas as the ‘first European novels’, but also as ‘prose epics’ and rightly points out that although they deal with ‘generally

¹⁷ Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 248.

¹⁸ Guillén, Claudio. *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 137.

¹⁹ Scholes, Robert and Kellogg, Robert. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 49. The same generic label is used by Ker, W. P. *Epic and Romance. Essays on Medieval Literature*. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1931, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ However, as we shall soon see, Mikhail Bakhtin might have well regarded both literatures as being *novelistic*. See: Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981. In particular, see pp. 5-7; also p. 39.

“epic” subjects’, the sagas still lack and sometimes ironise ‘a kind of heroic grandeur’ implied in epic.²² Underplaying the heroic grandeur and the inclusion of humour and irony is another thing that the sagas and Serbian epic poems have in common and this is also what sets them apart from other medieval epics, i.e. from the ‘lofty, austere tone, conveyed in a weighty metre’²³ of the *Nibelungenlied* or *Beowulf*. It is questionable, however, whether this attitude alone warrants a wholly separate generic label, and the alternative that Clover suggests for the sagas, ‘the long prose form’, seems too general – equally applicable to works as diverse as Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Tacitus’s *Germania*, or contemporary pop stars’ autobiographies.

To be sure, Mikhail Bakhtin already asserted that the lack of grandeur (or ‘distance’) and above all, humour, marks the end of the epic:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical, it must be brought close.²⁴

This view of Bakhtin’s is, however, built on the notion of the epic as a claustrophobically enclosed genre whose world is bereft of ‘any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy;’²⁵ it is the world set in an ‘absolute past’ in which ‘it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything’.²⁶ Of course, this narrow conception of the epic is much needed if the democratic novel with its relentless youthful energies and its *heteroglossia* is to be cast in the role (an epic role?) of the saviour of literature from the stilting grip of the ‘half-moribund genre’²⁷ of epic.

Scholars in recent years are, however, very reluctant either to grant the epic such

²² Clover, Carol J. ‘The Long Prose Form’, *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 1986, p. 10.

²³ Hatto, Arthur T. ‘Medieval German’ in: Hatto, *Traditions*, p. 169.

²⁴ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

power, or to accuse it of such blind dependence on some monolithic tradition that is supposed to remain unchanged by individual epics, detached somehow from the very things that make it. Tradition may be viewed by a community as sacrosanct at any given moment, but it is hardly set in stone, and modern field studies in folklore²⁸ show that whatever is conceived as tradition always tends to adapt itself to the present needs of a group. As Jeremy Downes points out:

[E]pic is thus never part of an absolute past, but is always both the remaking of the tradition in light of the contingent present, and the remaking of the present in light of the tradition [...].²⁹

Equally, while it is easy to see how the epic's panegyric roots and its subjection to the censure of the community expecting to see its own desired image reflected in their poem/ a story leaves little room for indeterminacy (little, mind, not no room at all!), this still does not mean that epics cannot, do not, 'explore and question what they celebrate'.³⁰ Bakhtin recognises this to a degree and so allows for the possibility of other genres, epic too (in particular, Romantic epics of Byron and Pushkin, but we shall see in the chapters to follow how the sagas and Serbian epics also fit the description) to exhibit some plasticity, indeterminacy, ability to laugh and question, engagement with contemporaneity – qualities with which he endows the novel.

However, Bakhtin chooses to perceive these developments strictly anachronistically,

²⁸ Walter J. Ong gives an example of the Nigerian Tiv people who endorsed their current genealogy over the tradition recorded by the British forty years earlier; also illuminating is the example of the Gonja people of Ghana who claimed that the founder of their state, Ndewura Jakpa, had seven sons, but have, sixty years on, reduced this number to five (two tribal divisions that were supposed to have originated from the two sons that were not mentioned the second time round have been extinct meanwhile). Ong concludes: 'The integrity of the past was subordinated to the integrity of the present [...]. The present imposed its own economy on past remembrances'. See: Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982, p. 48.

²⁹ Downes, *Recursive Desire*, p. 14.

³⁰ Hainsworth, *Epic*, p. 6. In fact, Hainsworth cannot imagine longer epics without this ability to question as they praise and deems it a differentiating feature between them and short heroic poems. In his opinion, heroic poems can only 'celebrate, affirm and confirm something'. As I hope the chapters to follow will show, this distinction becomes void at least when applied to Serbian epic poems (whether this is also the case with some other heroic poetry I cannot claim at present). One only needs recall the criticism implied in Marko Kraljević's conduct during his duel with Musa the Highwayman (*Марко Краљевић и Муса Кеџиџа*), or in Prince Lazar's inability to recognise his friends from his enemies (*Кнежева вечера*), to see how volatile this distinction is.

as *novelization* and so ultimately a ‘liberation’ of all other ‘finished’ genres from their own restrictive congealed selves,³¹ rather than to observe them in terms of their internal dynamics, or allow for the evolution of those genres. While there is nothing wrong with Bakhtin’s celebration of the novel, his gusto in pondering its origins, or his imaginative and inspiring search for its precursors, one still needs to be reminded that something is only ever a *precursor* to something else if regarded with the benefit of the hindsight. In what Ward Parks dubs Bakhtin’s ‘peculiar pronovelistic generic chauvinism’,³² there is only ever room for protonovelistic discourse in what can, again, only be perceived as the ‘novel’s prehistory’. Bakhtin finds such discourse in the field of ‘serio-comical’, Socratic dialogues, memoirs, in the traditionally ‘low’ genres of comedy and satire: ‘in popular laughter, the authentic folkloric roots of the novel are to be sought’.³³

Laughter may well be the birth of the novel; for it to be the death of the epic, however, heroic grandeur, or ‘valorized distance’ has to be understood as *the essence* of the genre rather than one of the more ostensive features of many epics, a reinforced connection between otherwise unique nodes in Wittgenstein’s network of criss-crossing similarities. The heroic grandeur may not be as emphasised in Serbian epics and the sagas of Icelanders as it is in many other epics, (although, as implied in Clover and our two sets of heroes from the preface, *some* kind of it is very much present) but this does not necessarily make them less epic – only different kinds of epic. The strength in our two literatures of other such reinforced connections within the epic similarities network (we mentioned earlier the propensity for narration, the

³¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*; in particular, see p. 39.

³² Parks, Ward. ‘The Textualization of Orality in Literary Criticism’ in: Doane, A.N. and C.B. Pasternack, eds. *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*. London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p. 56.

³³ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 21.

general idea of 'heroes fighting other heroes',³⁴ the public and traditional character of these 'tales of the tribe',³⁵ etc.) keep them within this genre.

c) Networks of generic similarity

Indeed, an entirely different perspective opens if the epic, or any other genre for that matter, is granted the plasticity of a network. Rather than a discrete Euclidian form with clearly delineated edges (a form that cannot change), a genre can be envisaged as an amorphous, pulsating configuration (cluster of densely criss-crossing connections), groping its way within the space of generic possibilities,³⁶ now contracting, now bulging in various directions, inevitably touching and occasionally intermingling with other such configurations, growing larger or thinning out at points, coming loose, discharging a piece away... Each new work modifies the whole network, or as Tzvetan Todorov says, 'each new example modifies the species'.³⁷ From this perspective, the inclusion of laughter and crosspollination with the Aristotelian 'low' genres does not destroy the epic but simply becomes more or less possible at different stages of its evolution, stretching its imaginary boundaries. Consequently, it also becomes very difficult to claim that 'the only good epic is a dead epic';³⁸ it simply becomes unnecessary to kill off all other genres (existing or yet unrealised ones) so that one of them can stay forever young. Indeed, Jeremy Downes's extensive study of the epic - from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, over Milton,

³⁴ Hainsworth, *Epic*, p. 5.

³⁵ Downes, *Recursive Desire*, p. x.

³⁶ 'The space of generic possibilities' was inspired by Richard Dawkins's notion of 'genetic space', i.e. his incorporation of the mathematical concept of space into his study of biological evolution. In this space, 'the actual animals that have ever lived on Earth are a tiny subset of the theoretical animals that *could exist*'. (Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker*. London: Penguin, 1986, p. 73.) If we swap the word 'animals' for the word 'genres' we get the general idea of the space of generic possibilities. The interesting question of dynamics that make some animals/genres more likely than others will be suspended for the moment.

³⁷ Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973, p. 6.

³⁸ Downes, *Recursive Desire*, p. 245.

Macpherson and Ezra Pound, to Walcott's *Omeros*, Hilda Doolittle's *Helen in Egypt*, and the recent collaborative electronic efforts of Silvia Kantaris and Philip Gross - demonstrates a 'gradual inclusion of different voices, and different forms of tradition'³⁹ within this genre, and testifies to its remarkable resilience and vitality. For Downes, the epic lends itself to any group in need of defining/asserting its identity:

Walcott's *Omeros* not only exemplifies epic recursion, but highlights another point, that those who feel themselves to be deeply conditioned by loss – through cultural stratification based on race, sex, sex orientation, class, age, or region – have much at stake in recuperating epic traditions.⁴⁰

The scope of the present study is not as wide as Downes's. Rather, within this larger epic family, the thesis revolves around a more closely knit network of medieval epic (a network within a network) as a background against which the peculiarities of the sagas and Serbian epics (or rather, similar character of those peculiarities) come across most vividly.

d) The way they walk that walk

Reflecting on Wittgenstein's metaphor of family resemblances, J. P. Stern remarks that some family members will have 'the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking'.⁴¹ Both the sagas' and Serbian epics' similarities with other medieval epics are of 'the same eyebrows' or 'the same nose' nature – far more conspicuous. The parallels between *Nibelungenlied* for example, and the sagas are much more obvious, both being of Germanic origin, sharing the tradition. Serbian epics and *La Chanson de Roland* on the other hand both resound in

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁴¹ Stern, J. P. *On Realism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973, p. 29. Also see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 32.

decasyllabic metre and, concerning their subject matter, some scholars have even advocated a more (A. Vaillant,⁴² N. Banašević⁴³) or less (D. Kostić⁴⁴) direct influence of French *chansons de geste* on the Kosovo cycle.⁴⁵ To be sure, there are some similarities of this ‘eyebrows/nose’ nature present in the two literatures that are under scrutiny here,⁴⁶ but these are not only the least visible, but also the least interesting. They are also hardly surprising after the work done by the great comparatists such as Henry and Nora Chadwick⁴⁷ or Victor Zhirmunsky,⁴⁸ whose extensive studies point to a remarkable mobility and also a convergence of themes and motifs of heroic literatures worldwide, far beyond the narrowness of the Indo-European context. Marvelling at this kind of sparse and general similarities between our two ‘small’ European literatures when these are also shared with Turkic and Mongolian epics (or possibly explainable by mutual influences) would amount to a mere accumulation of

⁴² See: Zhirmunsky, Victor. ‘On the Study of Comparative Literature.’ *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 1967, 13, pp. 1-13.

⁴³ See: Redep, Jelka. ‘The Legend of Kosovo.’ *Oral Tradition*. 1991, 6, (2-3), p. 253.

⁴⁴ As opposed to Banašević and Vaillant who claim that the *chansons de geste* influenced the actual creation of the Kosovo poems, Kostić only allows for a modification of the already formed legend. Most scholars, however, remain sceptical and ascribe the similarities to the common Biblical influence (i.e. the Last Supper motif and the betrayal of Christ). See Redep, ‘The Legend’, p. 253.

⁴⁵ A cycle of poems whose central theme is the 1389 battle that took place on Kosovo polje (‘Blackbird field’). As reflected in most classifications, this battle represents a spiritual core of Serbian epics: a vast body of poetry is organised according to whether the events described happened before (Pre-Kosovo cycle/ ‘pretkosovski ciklus’) or after the Kosovo battle (Post-Kosovo cycle/ ‘pokosovski ciklus’).

⁴⁶ For example, in an attempt to interpret a scene from the *Wedding of King Vukašin* in which a dying hero, duke Momčilo, offers his sister in marriage to his treacherous killer, Veselin Čajkanović suggests that rather than in chivalric magnanimity, the reason for Momčilo’s apparently curious act should be sought in the old pagan belief in reincarnation. To corroborate his point, Čajkanović compares this scene to the one in *Vatnsdæla saga* in which the sly (rather than heroic) Þorsteinn kills the giant and an outlaw Jökull, who, like Momčilo, suggests his sister as Þorsteinn’s bride. He even advises Þorsteinn how to go about winning her hand and avoid incurring vengeance of his parents. And, just as Vukašin’s son Marko turns out to be like his uncle rather than his father, so does Þorsteinn’s son, Čajkanović maintains, take after Jökull. (In fact, Čajkanović is mistaken here: it is Þorsteinn’s grandson, Icelfander Jökull, that better fits the role since he even bears the name and the sword of his giant great uncle.) Coincidentally, this rather brief encounter is the only instance to my knowledge where, prior to my own research, a Serbian epic poem and an Icelandic saga came face to face. (See: Čajkanović, Veselin. *Stara srpska religija i mitologija*. Београд: СКЗ, БИГЗ, Просвета, Партенон, 1994, Vol. 5 p.49.)

⁴⁷ Chadwick, Henry and Nora. *The Growth of Literature*. Vols. I-III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

⁴⁸ Chadwick, Nora K. and Victor Zhirmunsky. *Oral Epics of Central Asia*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

bare literary-historical facts; it would be as though time had stood still ever since the age of Romanticism with its first enthusiastic endeavours to establish the subject of *Weltliteratur*.

Where the excitement of this study (and, perhaps also a justification for it) lies, however, is in the two literatures' irresistible, almost uncanny resemblance in their 'way of walking', in the new way they deal with the heroic yarn, in the convergence of their creative undercurrents. This way is so unlike any other, even unlike that of their closest respective relatives such as Eddic poetry in respect to the sagas, and Bosnian (Serbo-Croatian Muslim) heroic songs in respect to Serbian (or Serbo-Croatian Christian) epics, that, as mentioned above, both specialists in Serbian epic and Icelandic sagas considered it an idiosyncrasy, a unique development of their respective literatures. It is in this particular 'way of walking', I shall argue in the chapters to follow, that the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics resemble each other more closely than any other heroic literature.

1.1.2 Contextual compatibility

Another matter that needs to be addressed concerns the chronological discrepancies, both as regards the time at which the two literatures emerged, and the historic-fictional times they 'cover' (in terms of subject matter). In other words, what can the late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic texts describing the affairs of tenth-century people have in common with Serbian epic songs recorded in the nineteenth-century, their subject matter ranging from around the twelfth century to contemporary, nineteenth-century events?

a) Parallels in political systems

In many ways, these discrepancies in time are of a quantitative nature: regardless of the dates and numbers, the stages of economical and social development in which the two literatures grew are comparable. The closest anyone has come to recognising this is Stevan K. Pavlowitch in his recent book about the history of the shifting, fragmented political entities hiding behind the same unifying name of Serbia, the name used to provide a stable base, the sense of continuity to the Serbs' feeling of national belonging. The focus of Pavlowitch's study, however, is primarily on Serbian medievalism, on the political uses of tradition and history (from the nineteenth century on to the present day) rather than the tradition and history *per se*, and perhaps that is why the similarities between the two cultures are mentioned only in passing, as a fortuitous outcome of Pavlowitch's conversations with a fellow professor at Southampton, the medievalist Tim Reuter. Pavlowitch's main concern is to expose Serbian politicians' rhetoric and this is where the Icelandic parallel is useful. That is to say, he strips the idealised image of medieval Serbia ('free, self-governing and egalitarian until the quarrelsome greed of its potentates had delivered it up to the Turks')⁴⁹ of its proclaimed uniqueness by pointing to similar developments in Iceland:

It is interesting to note that, at the other end of the continent, Icelandic scholars and politicians were constructing a narrative based on the sagas – of a country once free, egalitarian and democratically self-governing until the greed of its élite delivered it up to the king of Norway in the 1260s.⁵⁰

Both sets of politicians have no need, and therefore no time, for the subtleties involved in the sagas'/ Serbian epics' representation of the past (i.e. in neither case does one find such a simple sequence of initial bliss followed by betrayal and the

⁴⁹ Pavlowitch, Stevan K. *Serbia: The History Behind the Name*. London: Hurst & Company, 2002. p. 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, note 5, p. 72.

demise of a golden age: ‘bliss’ was never unconditional, never flawless) and for different reasons, neither does Pavlowitch himself – as a historian, he is more attuned to the subtleties of the past as evidenced by what he considers *bona fide* historical sources. From the perspective of this study, however, both the similarities of the pasts in the sagas/Serbian epics and the similarity of use to which the two literatures had continually been put are interesting precisely because they are similarities, because they seem to point towards more general similarities of the socio-political conditions in which the two traditions developed. Indeed, Jesse Byock’s description of the political structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth as ‘the mixture of state and stateless’ is easily applicable to that of Serbia after the Turkish conquest in 1459, albeit that this condition in the two cultures is arrived at via entirely different routes. In Iceland, Byock sees it as a result of two forces pulling in opposite directions:

On the one hand, it inherited the tradition and the vocabulary of statehood from its European origins. On the other, Iceland was headless because of the class values of the immigrants [...]

Leadership was limited to local chieftains who often operated like ‘big men’ individuals whose authority often was temporary.⁵¹

In the post-conquest Serbia, on the other hand, it is the curious ‘combination of absolute despotism with a broadest democracy’⁵² that results in overall socio-political conditions remarkably similar to those of the immigrant Icelanders. As L.S.

Stavrianos explains:

The Turkish administrative system was based on the principle of indirect rule. In normal times it functioned satisfactorily. There was very little contact between Serbian subjects and the Turkish officials. The towns were centers of alien authority and consisted mostly of officials who were soldiers who were Turks, and merchants who were mostly Turks, Greeks, and Jews. The countryside was purely Serbian and it had a well-developed system

⁵¹ Byock, Jesse L. *Viking Age Iceland*. London: Penguin, 2001, pp. 64-65.

⁵² Stavrianos, L.S. *The Balkans Since 1453*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p. 41.

of local self-government. Each village elected a knez or a lord,⁵³ and each district an oborknez or grand knez. These leaders assessed and collected government taxes and exercised police and judicial functions of a local nature.⁵⁴

Inasmuch as the Turkish Sultan remained away at his seat in Constantinople and his representatives resided in towns while their Serbian subjects occupied the countryside and were left to manage their affairs at local and district assemblies (*skupštine*), loosely lead by their 'big men' (*knezovi*), the political conditions in which Serbian epic songs grew come as close as possible to those in which the sagas of Icelanders came into being. To be sure, while there is no explicit conquering force present in any shape on Icelandic soil, in terms of some absolute independence, the more powerful Norway, with its monopoly on trade with Iceland and its inevitable (step)motherly cultural influence is still too close for comfort. At any rate, different as the particularities and logistics may be, in both cases one encounters a peculiar combination of the feudal political structures and those of village patriarchy/oligarchy (with the former generally in the background and the latter at the forefront).

b) Parallels in systems of belief

Just as we find the paradoxical mixture of 'state and stateless' in the two peoples' political structures, so we come across a similarly unusual mixture of Christianity

⁵³ Because of its feudal connotations 'lord' seems an odd choice of a word to correspond to 'knez'. Throughout his book Stavrianos normally refers to knez as a village headman or a village chief, which seems much more adequate. See for example p. 239, just above the quoted passage.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 239. See also pp. 99 – 101. Like Stavrianos, Olive Lodge describes the political system in which Serbs lived as largely that of rudimentary village democracy and gives a similar assessment of the position of a knez as someone operating on the principle of 'big man' individual: 'They were supposed to keep their district in order, and to collect the taxes, and were directly responsible to the pasha. They settled disputes between Serb and Serb according to Serbian law and custom. Serbs unwilling to abide by such decrees might appeal to the kadi, but usually felt this to be inadvisable. The bashi-knez's district might not be entered by any armed Turk, not even by the kadi himself, and none might live there. Thus some spots were kept inviolate from the Turk besides layers of hajduks, and the mountain-tops of Montenegro.' (Lodge, Olive. *Peasant Life in Yugoslavia*. London: Seely, Service & Co. Ltd., 1941, p. 95.)

and paganism pervading their systems of belief and finding expression in their respective literatures.⁵⁵ It is perhaps worthy of note that both cultures accepted Christianity relatively late in comparison to their European neighbours. Although Christian missionaries (both Roman and Byzantine) were being sent to the Balkan Slavs ever since the seventh century, Serbs converted to Christianity only two centuries later. Even then, the majority of people have held tightly onto the faith of their ancestors and, according to Stanoje Stanojević, ‘fanatically defended old traditions, among other reasons, because they considered Christianity [...] a symbol of slavery and subservience’.⁵⁶ That this same worry concerning Christianity might have been shared by the Icelanders is perhaps best illustrated by chapter 102 of *Njáls saga*, in which the old woman Steinunn asks the missionary Þangbrandr if he has heard that Þórr challenged Christ to a single combat which Christ did not dare accept: “What I have heard,” said Þangbrandr, “is that Thor would be mere dust and ashes if God didn’t want him to live.”⁵⁷ [“Heyrt hefi ek þat,” segir Þangbrandr, “at Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska, þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði.”]⁵⁸ Before he can start preaching Christian values Þangbrandr has to convince Icelanders that Christ is no wimp and is in fact capable of providing better protection of their persons and property than Þórr. He also has to fight in single combats himself, establish himself as a great hero, a figure commanding respect. To be sure, while smiting his enemies with a sword, he uses a cross as his shield, but then again, the cross is as much present to further showcase Þangbrandr’s prowess (it makes a scant shield) as to symbolise the power of Christian faith. For at least seven decades after

⁵⁵ See Peter Foote and Svetozar Koljević, notes 5 and 6 above.

⁵⁶ ‘[Маса народа] фанатички је бранила старе традиције, сем других разлога и стога што је сматрала да је хришћанство [...] символ ропства и подчињености.’ Станојевић, Станоје. *Историја српског народа*. Београд: Издавачка књижарница Напредак, 1926, pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ *Njal's Saga* in: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Robert Cook, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. III, p. 125.

⁵⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit, 1954, Vol. XII, p. 265.

the conversion in the late tenth century, Icelanders could continue with their pagan practices (although, admittedly, these had to be conducted in private), the new priests married, their social status was not exceptionally high (in fact, some were little more than slaves of the church owners – chieftains and wealthy farmers), and general knowledge about the new faith was rather limited.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the most vivid remnant of the Serbian insistence on keeping the old traditions is *slava*, or the Patron Saint Day, a celebration very much alive to this day⁶⁰ and unique to the Serbs among other Slavonic peoples and other Orthodox Christians:

According to the peasants in the south and centre, the Christian missionary who originally baptized a family, by so doing converted their household god, or *lar* into a Christian saint, so that this special protection is not lost to them. In the more northern districts the people maintain that the *slava* commemorates the saint on whose festival the tribe or family was baptized.⁶¹

Again, the special flexibility and adaptability of the Serbian and Icelandic Churches, each developing ‘in a way that complemented what already existed rather than setting itself at odds with expected social behaviour’,⁶² came about due to completely different, even diametrically opposed, reasons. Jesse Byock sees this state of affairs as the consequence of Iceland’s isolated geographical position at the fringes of Europe:

The irregular and difficult communications that distanced Icelandic churchmen from their foreign superiors fostered the independent evolution of the Icelandic Church. The relative unimportance of Iceland in the eyes of the continental churchmen may also have been a factor.⁶³

⁵⁹ See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 303.

⁶⁰ In Serbian tradition this celebration is regarded as important as Christmas and Easter.

⁶¹ Lodge, *Peasant Life*, pp. 227-228. See also Lodge’s note (p. 228) referring to a study by Dr. Đuro Truhalka in which he demonstrated ‘an exact parallel between the cult of the lares or larismus and the *krsna slava*, even to the use of ceremonial objects and elements’.

⁶² Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 325.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

What extreme isolation has done for the Icelanders, extreme exposure has done for the Serbs. Serbian lands falling between the Eastern and Western spheres of influence, the Roman and Byzantine Churches each struggling to draw them into its own powerful orbit, meant that Christianity was not firmly entrenched in these lands for a very long time,⁶⁴ and that space was left for the old religious practices to persist and eventually become integrated into the new faith, rather than replaced by it. The fact that the twelfth-century founder of the first Serbian state and the Nemanjić ruling dynasty, Stefan Nemanja, was christened by the representatives of both Churches, that his elder son and successor, Stefan the First-Crowned (*Prvovenčani*), received his crown from the Pope, while his youngest, Sava, became the first Patriarch (archbishop) of the Serbian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, testifies to how volatile the situation had been, but also that this volatility was not necessarily always a bad thing. As much as this position of Serbian lands on the border between two worlds vying for prestige was often the main cause of political instability in the region, it was at the same time a powerful negotiating tool that, among other things, enabled an independent evolution of the Serbian Church. Later, after the demise of the Serbian medieval Empire, abolitions of the Patriarchate in Peć⁶⁵ at various times by the Turkish authorities (the last and final being in 1766), the growing illiteracy among the clergy and so the reliance on customs and popular belief rather than learned doctrine, further encouraged the religious syncretism of Christian and pagan elements that we also find in Iceland.

⁶⁴ See Станојевић, *Историја*, p. 99.

⁶⁵ The seat of Serbian Patriarchs since 1346.

c) *Parallels in economic structures*

If we consider the economy of the two peoples, apart from the same (quite basic) level of production with very little surplus being generated, again we find similar structures and practices in place. Despite continental Serbia being all covered by ‘the ocean of forests’⁶⁶ and Iceland being a turf and shrub covered island (surrounded by an ocean proper!), in both cases we are looking at peasant societies with animal husbandry and (to a lesser extent) agriculture and trade⁶⁷ as the predominant sources of sustenance. In her ethnographical study of peasant life in Yugoslavia, Olive Lodge describes Serbs as ‘villagers by nature’⁶⁸ who hardly felt at home in towns even before the arrival of the Turks,⁶⁹ and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen notes that there was ‘no cause for establishing towns in Iceland [since] the population was too small and too poor to create a sufficiently great concentration of wealth within the country’.⁷⁰ The most basic social and economic unit in Serbia was the *zadruga* (extended family group), a household consisting of several families related by blood or adoption, its main advantages being ‘more efficient production through division of labour’ and that ‘it afforded greater personal and economic security in turbulent

⁶⁶ This is how the famous nineteenth-century French writer and politician, Alphonse de Lamartine, described Serbian lush forests (he also compared them to the woodlands of North America) when he visited in 1833. (See for example Ђорђевић, Тихомир. *Наш народни живот*, Београд: Просвета, 1984, Vol.3, p. 173. Also, see Stavrianos, *Balkans*, p. 251.) Under the order of knez Miloš Obrenović, most of those forests were soon to be cut down and the rich soil cultivated and used for growing crops.

⁶⁷ According to Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘no real merchant class’ developed in Iceland – trade was largely controlled by Norway (Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1993, p.18.), and the closest Serbs came to being merchants (like some of the leaders – Karadorđe, for example) is, Stavrianos maintains, as ‘enterprising pig dealers’ (Stavrianos, *Balkans*, p. 238).

⁶⁸ Lodge, *Peasant Life*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ ‘Before Kosovo, the Serbian kings found it so impossible to induce their subjects to inhabit towns that they imported Venetians, Ragusians, or even Germans to people them. The great Serbian lords dwelt on their country estates; and after Kosovo the Bogomil landowners in Bosnia who accepted Islam continued to do so. But the Turkish successors of the slain Serbian nobles lived in towns, visiting their lands only once or twice a year when they came to collect their taxes in kind.’ (Lodge, *Peasant Life*, p. 92.)

⁷⁰ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 18.

periods'.⁷¹ The *zadruga*'s Icelandic counterpart is the farmstead; again, a household comprising an extended family group, its members connected by blood or fosterage, and also including farmhands and servants. Like a *zadruga*, a farmstead represented a hub around which the daily activities were organised: 'work and entertainment, sustenance and childrearing'.⁷² In addition, the larger scale needs of a community, needs that required the cooperation of many farmsteads, were in Iceland met by the *hreppar* ('a kind of parish',⁷³ 'communal units'⁷⁴ that regulated summer grazing, settled local disputes, organised communal labour, etc.) and were in Serbia accommodated by similar units at the village level (*seoske opštine/zadruge*) with the entrenched custom of *moba*. As Olive Lodge explains:

The members of neighbouring families help each other in every kind of field work. This custom (Moba) simplifies and shortens labour: and "many hands" make it possible to reap the wheat at its best moment, for the fields never ripen simultaneously.⁷⁵

This way of life persisted for centuries among both peoples and as a result, Vojislav Đurić notes, a Serb 'from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century did not differ much from his ancient ancestors' ['с краја XVIII и с почетка XIX века мало се разликовао од својих врло далеких предака'].⁷⁶

Similarly, in their 'Note on the social and legal background of the saga [*Grettir's Saga*]', D. Fox and H. Pálsson remark that 'life in eleventh-century Iceland was in many ways very similar to life in fourteenth-century, or even eighteenth-century,

⁷¹ Stavrianos, *Balkans*, p. 238.

⁷² Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 28.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁴ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 137.

⁷⁵ Lodge, *Peasant Life*, p. 120.

⁷⁶ Ђурић, Војислав. 'Српскохрватска народна епика' in: Ђурић, Војислав, ed. *Антологија народних јуначких песама*. Београд: Српска Књижевна Задруга, 1990, p. 17.

Iceland'.⁷⁷ Yet, what we need to bear in mind is that despite the two peoples' 'simple economy', we are nevertheless dealing with very 'complex culture'⁷⁸ – there are no signs of cultural stagnation. Where there are no means to create a high culture, there is no low culture either: all creative energies are invested and the best talents engaged in one place. In fact, as we shall discuss in due course, it is extremely hard to imagine an economically prosperous society in which the kind of art such as the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry would flourish.

d) Late and prolonged 'heroic ages': historical/ideological parallels

The time when the sagas of Icelanders were committed to vellum (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and the time Serbian epic poems were systematically collected and published for the first time (nineteenth century), represent very sensitive moments in their peoples' histories. Iceland loses its independence to Norway (c.1262) and the First Serbian Insurrection (1804), although brutally crushed by the Turks (1813), marks the beginning of the end of an era of subservience and reemergence of an independent Serbian state. In both cases, the circumstances (effectively, new/renewed 'heroic ages') have brought the issue of identity to the fore. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter three of this study, the historic-fictional times that the two literatures encompass are not accidental either. Sagas of Icelanders perceive the age of Settlement as a Golden Age of successful self-rule when there was plenty of land and natural resources for everybody, and even the climate itself was mild and friendly. At the same time the narratives are centred around feuding, and although the plots are gripping and the heroes splendid and

⁷⁷ Fox, Denton and Herman Pálsson. 'Note on the social and legal background of the saga' in: Fox, Denton and Herman Pálsson, transl. *Grettir's Saga*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, p. 193.

⁷⁸ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 69.

engaging, the devastating effects of blood begetting blood are recognised: the revenge culture is never glorified. It is not by accident either, that the Serbian epics are centred around the Kosovo tragedy,⁷⁹ its aftermath, as well as the happenings preceding the battle that had (in terms of pseudo-history and history to a degree) cost Serbia its independence. The strong medieval Serbia of the powerful Nemanjićs, with its sumptuous courts populated by brave nobles and lavish beauties is at the same time shown as rotten to the core. Emperor Dušan the Mighty (*Silni*), the ultimate source of Serbian prosperity and wealth is also portrayed as the source of great corruption and sin, with his intrigue-weaving lords at daggers drawn.

These apparently paradoxical attitudes towards the events of the past pervade the atmosphere of both the Icelandic sagas and the Serbian epic poems, accommodating two pressing needs that the two peoples must have felt simultaneously: a need to hope for a better future and the need to cope with the unsettling present. Hope for a brighter future is legitimised by the glorious past while, at the same time, that very past is being made accountable for the turbulent contemporaneity. In all the instability of the two countries and the uncertainty of the times, it was literature alone that provided both peoples with a palpable sense of identity, or rather acted as a forum in which, among other things, anxieties regarding identity could be played out and (temporarily) resolved. There is a saying in Serbia

⁷⁹ The Battle of Kosovo took place on St. Vitus's Day –15 June 1389 according to the Julian (Orthodox) calendar (or 28 June 1389 according to the Gregorian calendar). By medieval standards, the battle involved a great number of people - around 100, 000. Both Turkish and Serbian sources exaggerate the odds, but it seems reasonable to believe that there were c.60, 000 Turks and c.40, 000 Serbian allied forces (See: Durham, Thomas. *Serbia: the Rise and the Fall of a Medieval Empire*, York: Sessions, 1989). The battle was devastating for both sides and both the commander of the Serbian armies, Prince Lazar, and the Turkish Sultan, Murad I, were slain. Although the battle itself seems to have been closer to a draw than a decided Christian defeat as portrayed by the tradition, Serbian provinces could not easily recuperate and the Ottoman Turks were ultimately victorious: Serbia became a vassal state. Svetozar Koljević notes that 'for several decades Serbia was to undergo the agonies of recuperation in vassalage, the agonies of faction, treacheries and defeats that would turn it before long into a largely depopulated and illiterate land. There was no human drama or historical impetus lacking for the Battle of Kosovo to be seen as the Doomsday of national grandeur and prosperity' (Koljević, *The Epic*, pp. 154 -55).

that recognises this: 'It is the song that kept us hanging on, all our thanks to it'.⁸⁰ As any art worth its name, sagas and epics must have provided their audiences with the therapeutic, cathartic release of strong emotions such as anger, hope, powerlessness and pain. Identification with courageous ancestors performing glorious feats must have been a powerful antidote to humiliating actuality. At the same time, interwoven with dreaming and wish-fulfilment as they are, both the sagas and the epic poems were conceived as histories and as such they offered examples of positive and negative behaviour, encouraging young people to fashion their morality in the mould of their favourite heroes. In the impulse to preserve this kind of literature different needs sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary, have found their expression. And although the sagas of Icelanders were written down in the late thirteenth – fourteenth centuries and Serbian epic poems in the nineteenth, they shared the moment in which there was 'the meeting between a living oral tradition and a society that needed - and was able - to turn this tradition into literature'.⁸¹ Seen in this light, the chronological discrepancies amount to a technicality. As a result, a perspective opens which allows the two literatures to be compared: the economical, historical and social circumstances in many aspects coincide.

e) Indeterminate equations and convergent designs

However, to claim that the similarity in socio-historical circumstances produces as a direct consequence a similarity in literary art would be simplistic and imprecise. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen observes:

⁸⁰ 'Pesma nas je održala, njojzi hvala.' The line in question actually originated with the famous Romantic poet Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, but has long since been accepted as a saying, a folk proverb. Another illustrious Romantic poet whose many aphorisms became accepted by the oral tradition is the Montenegrin Prince-bishop, Petar II Petrović Njegoš.

⁸¹ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 74.

The emergence of the sagas cannot be traced simply to a particular combination of social conditions. No corresponding literature was created in other countries which had undergone a similar historical development.⁸²

Ruth Finnegan also warns against the idea of drawing a simple causal line between a certain type of society and a type of literature. In particular, she criticises Henry and Nora Chadwick's notion of the 'heroic age' as an early stage of social development marked by an aristocratic, military ethos, and with heroic poetry as its product:

[W]arlike and aristocratic societies may flourish without necessarily producing the kind of epic poetry postulated by the Chadwicks – witness the stress on panegyric rather than narrative poetry in a number of earlier African kingdoms.⁸³

To Finnegan's example we may readily add skaldic verse, another form of praise poetry, highly sophisticated and ambiguous, that used to thrive at courts of princes and *jarls* (earls) throughout medieval Scandinavia. These particular examples are, however, not as damaging to reflection theories as it may first appear, since the two forms of poetry are actually closely related. Namely, heroic narrative verse itself most likely originates in panegyric poetry that was initially composed to glorify the deeds of dead ancestors (*laudes maiorum*), with the narration of feats slowly becoming more prominent than the praise component.⁸⁴ One would actually be fairly stretched to point to an early society with a strong military ethos that does not produce either heroic literature or praise poetry, if not both, as is the case with Scandinavian countries. What is perhaps harder to account for is the ostensive presence of other literary forms such as fairy-tales, ritual poetry, comic tales, etc., that are not specifically tied to the idea of a 'heroic age' and yet can be found

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁸³ Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 248.

⁸⁴ See for example Чајкановић, Веселин. *Студије из српске религије и фолклора 1925-42*. Београд: СКЗ, БИГЗ, Просвета, Партедон, 1994, Vol. II pp. 504-507. See also Vol. V, p. 34.

flourishing side by side with (or, as often happens to be the case with our two literatures, integrated within) heroic narratives in warlike societies. Inasmuch as reflection theories indeed offer single literary solutions to social equations, we must agree with Finnegan that they fail. And this is in fact what Finnegan criticises most ardently – the simplistic causal connection that does not account for ‘the manifold ways in which man makes use of literature, and the inventiveness and imagination of human beings’⁸⁵ – she does not reject reflection theories wholesale. For Finnegan, literature responds to the constraints placed upon it by ‘current social conventions’,⁸⁶ but it relates to society in ‘an indirect and subtle way’.⁸⁷

Vast and unbounded as human imagination and inventiveness are, what is important not to lose from sight is that not *all* possible literary forms are equally likely to flourish or dominate a literary scene at any one time. While we may come across a fairy-tale in a warlike society at an early stage of economic development, we are hardly likely to find a bucolic poem (one needs to be highly urbanised to imagine ‘pastoral simplicity’, let alone long for it), a sonnet, or a ‘stream of consciousness’ novel. The equation in which literature and society find themselves may not be as simple as that proposed by the reflection theories, but it may well be, to borrow R. Jakobson’s and J. Tynjanov’s metaphor,⁸⁸ an indeterminate one, with no one, unique solution, but with no unlimited amount of possible solutions either. Some of these literary solutions are more likely to flourish (or likely to be more prominent) than others in particular social environments. In detail, appearance and the ways they are

⁸⁵ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 262.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸⁸ Jakobson, Roman and Jurij Tynjanov. ‘Problems in the Study of Literature and Language’ in: Matejka, Ladislav and Krystyna Pomorska, eds. *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971, pp. 79 – 81. In particular, see p. 80: ‘[...] the immanent laws of literary (linguistic) evolution form an indeterminate equation; although they admit only a limited number of possible solutions, they do not necessarily specify a unique solution.’

applied they can differ widely – this is where the human inventiveness comes to the fore, and also where ultimately unique paths of development each literature-producing community undergoes leave their mark most vividly. Our two literatures illustrate the point in question very well: with the sagas being prose narratives the length of a decent novel in some cases, and Serbian epics a short heroic poetry, they may well be as different as whales and bats. What perhaps constitutes a much more exciting observation is that in response to their socio-historical environmental pressures and opportunities, in the ‘analogous functions’⁸⁹ they perform, Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics may well be as *similar* as whales and bats.

Inhabiting the impenetrable dark depths of oceans and caves, both whales and bats (or, more precisely, the natural selection working on them) discovered an exceptionally sophisticated system of navigation that is among biologists known as echolocation. Although there are great variations in detail and the ways whales and bats (but also different species of whales/dolphins and different species of bats) use it, the general principle on which echolocation (sonar technology) works is based on measuring the time interval between the sounds (clicks) that animals emit and their echo as the sound reverberates off the features of landscape (or a potential prey), the principles also used in human made radars⁹⁰ and ultrasound equipment. Being mammals, both whales and bats had a common ancestor somewhere along the line, but echolocation is not explained by this fact since the common ancestor did not possess it. Rather, as Richard Dawkins (with whom the example used here originates) argues, sonar technology was ‘invented’ independently by the two

⁸⁹ See note 97 below.

⁹⁰ The main difference between the two technologies is that radars exploit radio waves while sonars rely on ultrasound. See Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 23.

species⁹¹ under evolutionary pressure to manoeuvre through dark regions. In fact, echolocation is used (admittedly, with less sophistication) by many other species: oil birds of South America and cave swiftlets of the Far East, shrews, rats and seals. The fact that these similar solutions ('designs') also differ in their appearance and the ways they are used testifies, Dawkins explains,

to their independent evolutionary origins and histories. The basic rationale is that, if a design is good enough to evolve once, the same design *principle* is good enough to evolve twice, from different starting points, in different parts of the animal kingdom.⁹²

This ability of biological species to converge upon similar designs as they face similar environmental pressures and opportunities⁹³ is paralleled by the behaviour of various literary 'species' (styles, canons, genres, etc.) involved in literary evolution(s). Long before Dawkins's exciting thoughts on cultural evolution in which the smallest self-propagating units are not genes but *memes*⁹⁴ – things like 'to be, or not to be', $E = mc^2$, the zigzag pattern, etc. – Russian Formalists (and later Czech Structuralists) had already fostered the evolutionist model in thinking about the changes of and relationships between literary fashions and styles, the degree of literature's autonomy in respect to its environment (literature as an open system – 'a system of systems'), as well as its role as an agent of social processes, not merely

⁹¹ And so were the radars independently discovered by the British, Germans and Americans. See Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 24.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹³ Having to scour darkness in search of prey potentially poses a navigational difficulty, but it also offers an important opportunity – it significantly reduces competition with the majority of other predators who hunt during the day.

⁹⁴ The word was coined by Dawkins in his popular science best seller, *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). *Meme* originates from the Greek word *mimeme* – memory, but was also meant to correspond to 'gene', and was thus made monosyllabic. To the above examples of memes we may add concepts and ideas (e.g. 'freedom', 'vendetta', 'recycling') film catchphrases ('Here's looking at you, kid'), fashion styles (jeans, sari), dances (e.g. the notorious *Makarena*), catchy melodies, 'earworms' ('Don't worry, be happy', ta, ta, ta, taaaaa opening of Beethoven's fifth symphony), games (chess, football, hide and seek), food (pizza, sushi, curry), and many, many other memorable and imitable cultural units.

their object.⁹⁵ In this they have moved far beyond the Victorian notions concerning the inexorability of progress, the linear development from ‘lower’ towards ‘higher’, ‘more perfect’ entities – a conflation between evolution and genesis that had more to do with the pre-evolutionary idea of the ‘great chain of being’, the one which, Dawkins notes, ‘should have been destroyed by evolution but which was, mysteriously, absorbed into the way many people thought about evolution’.⁹⁶

The reason I mention Russian Formalists in this context is to steer away from whales and bats and their convergence on echolocation back to the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics and their convergence on a similar kind of representational complexity. The evolutionist notion of convergence of good designs described by Dawkins above, had already made its way into literary studies and a particularly good application of it can be found in Jurij Tynjanov’s 1927 essay, ‘On Literary Evolution’:

The South American tribes created the myth of Prometheus without the influence of classical mythology. These facts are convergence or coincidence. [...] “Influence” can occur at such a time and in such a direction as literary conditions permit. In the case of functional coincidence, whatever influences him provides the artist with elements which permit the development and the strengthening of the function. *If there is no such “influence,” then an analogous function may result in analogous formal elements without any influence.*⁹⁷

Tynjanov’s thinking is highly relevant in our case: while the ‘eyebrows/nose’ type of similarities between the Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics mentioned earlier may well be explained by mutual influences or some common Indo-European ancestor,

⁹⁵ For a recent reappraisal of the Russian Formalist and Czech Structuralist thought (especially in relation to the largely unacknowledged shift in the Formalist scholars from their earlier position of literature’s complete autonomy towards the one that also takes its social and historical contexts into account) see Striedter, Jurij. *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁹⁶ Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 261.

⁹⁷ Tynjanov, Jurij. ‘On Literary Evolution’ in: Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. 76, my emphasis.

their analogous complex ‘ways of walking’ on the other hand, the particular brand of realism with which they invest the heroic yarn seems to have more to do with convergence of the two peoples’ responses to their socio-historical environments, the ‘analogous function’ that the two literatures performed. As I hope the above sections on parallels in social and historical conditions illustrate, the demands placed on the two literatures were complex and diffused, with apparently incongruous elements forced into cohabitation: the aristocratic and the democratic ethos, Christian and pagan systems of belief, heroic feats and haymaking, great historical victories and great historical retreats. These could not have been accommodated by heroic determinism and the unilateral perspective of an uncompromised victor one finds in the majority of earlier epics. The sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems were both created by ‘small’ subordinated peoples under the threat of cultural assimilation, and so the basic epic concepts such as ‘heroic code’ and honour, although still relevant, were forced to undergo revision. The traditionally ‘high’ epic genre (in Aristotelian terms) as inherited from the aristocratic past was adapted to the present needs of the two largely peasant societies and so it got to be spiced up with the ‘low’ genres of comedy and satire. This enabled a more layered, less deterministic representation of the characters and the world around them.

Similarity in social circumstances does not determine similarity in literary art, but it certainly conditions it, and although Icelandic sagas and Serbian epic songs are, indeed, very different – they are not ‘corresponding’ in Meulengracht Sørensen’s sense – there are still many points of correspondence, however, points that will be explored in more detail in the chapters to follow.

1.1.3 Comparability of the media

The next comparability issue that needs to be addressed concerns the fact that the sagas of Icelanders (the earliest preserved vellum manuscripts date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) are products of a highly developed literary culture, while Serbian epics are nineteenth-century records from a living oral tradition. However, in many ways, the oral/written literature division here is not as clear-cut as it first appears.

a) On oral/written dichotomy

‘Oral’ and ‘written’ imply different modes of being for what is still one thing – verbal art; it would be misleading to assume that the difference between them is fundamental, especially as many *actual* works of literature (medieval vernacular in particular) embody both. To be sure, one of the important successes of Parry-Lord’s revolutionary Oral-Formulaic theory⁹⁸ has been to show that the special ways of composition, performance and reception involved in oral literature⁹⁹ require an adjustment in our sensitivities and interpretative approaches that are conditioned by our literary training, specifically developed to deal with written texts.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, once attention was drawn to the specificities of oral literature, the

⁹⁸ As postulated in Lord, Albert Bates. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960.

⁹⁹ Viewed strictly etymologically, the expression ‘oral literature’ is something of a contradiction in terms, as the word ‘literature’ originates in the Latin word *litterae* (‘letters’). However, the nature of language is such that it adapts and that meanings tend to depart from their immediate etymological origins; at present, the synonym for ‘literature’ is hardly ‘written art’, but ‘art of words’, or ‘verbal art’. Ruth Finnegan has persuasively argued for the validity of the expression ‘oral literature’ on the basis that ‘the term is now so widely accepted and the instances clearly covered by the term so numerous, that it is an excess of pedantry to worry about the etymology of the word ‘literature’, any more than we worry about extending the term ‘politics’ from its original meaning of the affairs of the classical Greek *polis* to the business of the modern state’. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ As Walter J. Ong explains: ‘Language study in all but recent decades has focused on written texts rather than on orality for a readily assignable reason: the relationship of study itself to writing’. See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 8.

danger has been to overgeneralise the findings of Parry-Lord (based on the Bosnian Muslim epic songs from the 1920s and 30s) and ignore the subtleties and differences involved in various oral genres within one tradition and across different oral traditions and social contexts on the one hand, and to postulate an absolute difference between the ‘oral’ and the ‘written’, on the other. Recently, scholars dealing with oral and oral-derived literature have cautioned against the endorsement of any such fundamentalist dichotomy,¹⁰¹ and have argued that ‘oral’ and ‘written’ are better understood as abstract, idealised extremes rarely to be found in an essentialised state ‘in nature’.

Indeed, along with the myths of ‘pure and uncontaminated “oral culture,”’¹⁰² and of ‘only one special oral style’,¹⁰³ Ruth Finnegan’s comprehensive study of oral poetry dispels the myth of the gaping chasm between the oral and the written. Her extensive fieldwork and a wide-ranging comparative study have shown that qualities which we have learnt to associate exclusively with the poetry of literate and economically developed societies (e.g. the self-reflective aspect, meta-textuality, irony) can also be achieved without the aid of writing and are fostered by hunting and gathering peoples such as the Eskimo of the 1920s. Eskimos produce a sophisticated, deeply meditative oral poetry, reflecting on creative struggles poets encounter, with a poet occasionally passing ironic comments on his own craft, or that of his opponent.¹⁰⁴ The audience, whose members are something of poets themselves,¹⁰⁵ take great pleasure in discussions about the ways in which poetry is

¹⁰¹ See for example the collection of essays on the relationships between the oral and the textual, *Vox Intexta*; (note 34 above); especially Foley, John Miles. ‘Orality, Textuality, and Interpretation’, pp. 34–45.

¹⁰² Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁴ For some examples see: *Ibid.*, pp. 115–117; also pp. 157–158.

¹⁰⁵ While some people will inevitably show more talent than others, Finnegan claims that ‘among some groups of Eskimos a measure of skill in composition was expected from everyone’. (*Ibid.*, p. 196.)

created. Eskimo are not alone in this; Finnegan also mentions the *ijala* singers of the Yoruba people, and we can add the complex, riddle-like poetry of the Scandinavian skalds that one frequently encounters in the sagas of Icelanders (heroes of *Egils saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and many more, are also accomplished skalds). Serbian oral lyric poetry (especially the mythological and ritualistic poems) is also deeply meditative and ambiguous, and there are some self-reflective comments to be found in Serbian epic poetry too.¹⁰⁶

On the other side of the coin, Finnegan stresses that the repetition and formulaity which we tend to perceive as a defining stylistic feature of oral poetry is ‘a common device of poetic expression. The “aesthetics of regularity” can be found in all poetry, oral as well as written’.¹⁰⁷ Various rhetorical devices, genres and figures of speech that form an indispensable part of the modern poet’s and prose writer’s palette have their roots in oral verbal art. Moreover, the reception of written works is also affected by orality; as Walter J. Ong argues, orality is an integral part of the reading process:

“Reading” a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high-technology cultures. *Writing can never dispense with orality.*¹⁰⁸

This last premise (‘writing can never dispense with orality’) has found a particularly interesting expression in Bakhtin’s distinction between monologic and dialogic discourse, where the latter has affinities with the oral mode through its ability to represent multiple (often dissenting) voices (*heteroglossia*).¹⁰⁹ The distinction primarily relates to written works; in terms of genres, the novel is generally considered more dialogic than poetry, but with inevitable exceptions: according to

¹⁰⁶ See for example Детељић, Мирјана. *Урок и невеста: поетика епске формуле*. Београд: Чигоја, 1996, especially p. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 8, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 270-272.

Bakhtin, a poem by Heine is more dialogic than a novel by Tolstoy. What has not been sufficiently recognised, however, is the relevance of Bakhtin's monologic/dialogic distinction to works of oral verbal art. No doubt this is due to the notion being rather counterintuitive: while the remnants of orality are conceivable within a written literary work, the notion of oral works having something 'written' about them clashes with the fact that 'oral' historically precedes 'written'.¹¹⁰ If, however, the written/oral distinction is (like the monologic/dialogic) understood also to relate to the aesthetics rather than simply the *historical condition* in which we find certain works of verbal art, the notion becomes more acceptable. In the next chapter I will propose that some oral and oral-derived works are more dialogic (or rather, 'distributed') than others, depending on the strength and proportion of what Bakhtin has called 'centripetal' (unificatory, stratifying) and 'centrifugal' (decentralising, disunifying) forces¹¹¹ that are acting upon the traditions in which these works originated.

For the moment, however, I will be satisfied with Finnegan's suggestion to conceive of the oral/written alterity as 'a continuum',¹¹² rather than the 'deep gulf' dividing two extremes. Now, to come back to the points of comparability between our two literatures' mediums, if we were to place Serbian epics on the oral and the Icelandic sagas on the written end of the Finnegan's oral/written continuum and let each home in on the spot that describes it best,¹¹³ the two would, I shall argue below, end up occupying spots very close to one another.

¹¹⁰ A notable exception is Jacques Derrida whose concept of writing (taking a cue from Freud's 'magic writing pad') covers 'the entire field of linguistic signs' including the phonic signifiers. Namely, a spoken word is made 'graphic' through its very repeatability ('iterability'), its materiality in sound. See Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 44.

¹¹¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp.270-272.

¹¹² Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 272.

¹¹³ It goes without saying that each particular saga and each particular epic poem would have its own unique place on the continuum. However, for the moment I am ignoring the particular works and am

b) Orality of the written sagas of Icelanders

As has already been noted, *Íslendingasögur* are products of an advanced literary culture. Yet, although we distinguish between individual styles of the saga writers, their names are irretrievably lost to us. Notwithstanding the possible exception of the thirteenth-century chieftain, historian and a man of great erudition, Snorri Sturluson, to whom some scholars¹¹⁴ attribute *Egils saga*, the identities of the saga authors are mostly consigned to guesswork. A more modest and (as it is often the case) more fruitful pursuit has been to venture suggestions concerning some aspects of the saga writers' identities, rather than trying to place a concrete name behind a saga; so, for example, taking into consideration the prominence of strong female characters (with Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir as its heroine) and the focus on male beauty as an object of desire, Helga Kress has argued that *Laxdæla saga* was most probably written by a woman,¹¹⁵ while Hallvard Magerøy suggested that *Bandamanna saga*'s satirical jabs at the chieftain class indicate 'that it arose in a milieu influenced by the Church'.¹¹⁶ But even if the severe lack of evidence did not prevent us from identifying each of

imagining instead how the larger literary units (e.g. 'sagas of Icelanders', 'chansons de geste', 'Modernist poetry', 'Henry Fielding's novels', etc.) would fare on the continuum. It is rather like paying particular attention to centimetre markers on a measure tape (but with no such regularity of spaces in between the markers assumed), even though millimetres are present too.

¹¹⁴ See for example Torfi H. Tulinius. *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, Odense: Odense University Press, 2002. Sigurður Nordal has on the other hand suggested that *Grettis saga* was created by Snorri's nephew, the famous historian, Sturla Þórðarson. See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1958, p. 53.

¹¹⁵ Helga Kress. 'Meget samstrevet må det tykkes deg. Om kvinneopprør og genretvang i Sagaen om Laksdölene.' *Historisk tidsskrift*, 1980, 43, pp. 266-280. For more suggestions about the saga being written from the woman's point of view see Auerbach, Loren. 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla saga*.' *Saga-Book*, 1998, 25, pp. 30-52. Also see Jesch, Judith. *Women and the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991, p. 198, and Cook, Robert. 'Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*.' *Skáldskaparmál*, 1992, 2, p. 57.

¹¹⁶ Magerøy, Hallvard. *Studiar i Bandamanna Saga: kring gjerd-problemet*. København: E. Munksgaard, 1957, p. 310. Of course, the anti-aristocratic bias of *Bandamanna saga* can just as readily point to a rich farmer's homestead as a likely milieu for the saga to arise, especially as it is the clever farmer that outwits the greedy chieftains, not a cleric.

the saga writers by name,¹¹⁷ it would still be dangerous to impose onto these figures our print-culture notions and expectations of authorship. As Kellogg and Scholes note, thinking that a saga writer ‘depended upon either books or his own individual invention for the major elements of his story does not seem justified by the evidence’.¹¹⁸

Indeed, the assumption that saga authors generously helped themselves from oral tradition as well as earlier written sagas is widely accepted by contemporary scholars who nowadays largely occupy the golden mean between the more radical wings of Free-prose and Book-prose theories of the past. In its extreme form¹¹⁹ Free-prose theory proposes that the sagas circulating in oral tradition were committed to vellum by scribes in more or less unchanged form, whereas the Book-prose theory (again at its extreme¹²⁰) looks at the sagas as literary compositions independent of oral tradition and explains the similarity of their style to that of oral narratives exclusively in terms of the saga authors’ deliberate imitation of this ‘oral style’, its employment as a literary device. Carol Clover’s 1986 revival of the *páttr* theory (according to which the sagas are made up of shorter narratives, *pættir*)¹²¹ in the light of comparative evidence that has emerged from research into live oral narrative traditions of Africa is an ideal compromise between the two extremes since it gives equal prominence to oral tradition and to the individual saga authors. Clover suggests that

¹¹⁷ See section c below, where I consider the impact of the fact that the names and the background information of a good number of Serbian epic singers who have contributed to Vuk’s collections are known.

¹¹⁸ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ This position is usually associated with Knut Liestøl.

¹²⁰ Usually associated with Walter Baetke.

¹²¹ The idea was originally proposed by Theodor Möbius in 1852 and articulated in more detail by A.U. Bååth in 1888. For a full survey of the development of the *páttr* theory, see Clover, ‘The Long Prose Form’, p. 31; Also see Andersson, Theodore M. ‘The Long Prose Form in Medieval Iceland.’ *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 2002, 101, p. 387.

[...] a whole saga existed at the preliterate stage not as a performed but as an immanent or potential entity, a collectively envisaged “whole” to which performed parts of *þættir* of various sizes and shapes were understood to belong, no matter what the sequence or the frequency of their presentation.¹²²

It is only with the saga authors that these ‘immanent wholes’ become integrated wholes, acquire concrete shapes. This might have been achieved, Clover argues, in the manner of the Congolese singer, Mr. Rureke, who was able to deliver his version of the whole of the *Mwindo* epic (even though he had never done it before) once such performance was solicited from him by the folklorist, Daniel Biebuyck.¹²³

Recently, Theodore M. Andersson has partly challenged Clover’s argument, raising the question of ‘how and why the first realizations of the “immanent saga” were so successful’,¹²⁴ and arguing that in some form long sagas already circulated in oral tradition, thus providing ‘the necessary latitude for practising those larger rhetorical patterns and strategies which define the style that ultimately emerged in the written sagas’.¹²⁵ While Andersson’s question is definitely something worth thinking about further (although it is debatable whether all sagas are equally ‘successful’ in the sense Andersson promotes), his actual argumentation is, however, not without problems. For instance, he suggests that if the saga authors were writing the immanent wholes for the first time, their style would show tendencies towards amalgamation and ‘disconnected and repetitive’¹²⁶ representation of conflicts one finds in other short-term traditions, such as that of the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) that deal with the Sturlung Age feuds. Indeed, this tendency towards

¹²² Clover, ‘The Long Prose Form’, p. 34.

¹²³ In a normal oral situation (the duration of ‘one sitting’) such a long performance of consecutive episodes would have been unthinkable, and in a certain way even unnecessary: the storyteller relates a random/required episode while fully relying on the audience’s knowledge of the immanent whole.

¹²⁴ Andersson, ‘The Long Prose Form in Medieval Iceland’, p. 387.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

long-drawn narration swamped with detail¹²⁷ is also reflected in Serbian epics treating the contemporary struggles in the First and Second Serbian Insurrections against the Turks, for example, Old Raško's¹²⁸ rather tedious *Battle of Deligrad*. However, other experienced and talented singers such as Filip Višnjić still manage to prune their contemporary material and (at least on occasion) come up with such masterpieces as *The Battle of Mišar* and *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*. It is therefore conceivable that the same could have happened with a talented saga writer well versed in oral tradition. Also, some of the rhetorical devices such as prefiguring events in dreams that Andersson treats as specifically suited to long narrative forms are also often found in shorter ones such as heroic poetry (e.g. *Death of Senjanin Ivo*) and could have been adapted by the saga writers to suit longer forms.

While these and similar considerations reveal that there is still a long way to go in refining our stance on the degree of the prominence of the oral tradition in the development of the sagas in general and each saga in particular (as well as the degree of their independence from it), it is safe to assume that what makes the *Íslendingasögur* as products of a literary culture different from today's literary works is the fact that they are medieval *traditional* narratives, and that, as Vésteinn Ólason points out, they are so in a twofold sense:

[...] firstly, because they are based on traditional matter and traditional ways of telling a story; and secondly, because they adhered to a literary tradition which, in principle, assigned no role to the individual talent.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ The prominence of detail in poetry/stories composed in close proximity to the event described is usually due to the copious amount of information available about the event on the one hand, and the storytellers' commitment to the truthfulness of the account (as well as the ability of the audience to challenge its veracity) on the other. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see chapter 3 of this study.

¹²⁸ Old Raško's speciality are the songs of olden times. Among his contributions to Karadžić's collections are two exceptional, anthological poems: *Building of Skadar* and *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs*.

¹²⁹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998, p. 21.

Theodore M. Andersson¹³⁰ successfully pinpoints these ‘traditional ways of telling a story’ in the sagas, be they the formulaic phrases of the type ‘some people say this while others say that’, indicating the existence of different traditions about a certain event, the sagas’ references to one another, or the sheer inexhaustible reservoir of names that the authors were able to procure within a single saga while at the same time expecting their audience, hardly fatigued by this, to provide the context. Robert Kellogg argues that the reason traditional subject matter and forms of narration were to such a large extent preserved in the early written narratives is

because only the traditional form and substance could qualify such works as being “literature”, in contrast to “non-literature”. Only with the somewhat later invention of authorship is high narrative art a possibility. And even then our medieval authors carried on a long and often ironic love affair with traditional art.¹³¹

Gísli Sigurðsson (henceforth referred to as G.S.) has also gone a long way in establishing the sagas’ traditional nature, as well as showing how some instances previously treated as clear cases of literary borrowing between the sagas are more readily explainable by an active oral tradition in their background, not least because the cost of manuscript production would have made access to written sagas severely restricted. For example, he presents a plausible argument that different representation of the same events and characters in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Finnboga saga ramma* (e.g. the positive portrayal of the Ingimundarssons in the former, and a rather unflattering one in the later) are most likely due to different traditions about them originating in the two different districts: Vatnsdalur that was under the sphere of influence of the brothers Þorsteinn and Jökull on the one hand, and Borg, the stomping ground of

¹³⁰ Andersson, Theodore M. ‘Textual Evidence for an Oral Family Saga.’ *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi*, 1966, 81, pp. 1-23.

¹³¹ Kellogg, Robert. ‘Varieties of tradition in medieval narrative’ in: Bekker-Nielsen, Hans *et al*, eds. *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1979, p. 125.

Finnbogi rammi, on the other.¹³² Another striking example G.S. singles out is that of different portrayals of Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, or Víga-Bjarni ('Killer-Bjarni') in *Vápnfirðinga saga* and other various sagas/ *þættir*:

Presumably the farther one gets, in time and space, from the real Bjarni Brodd-Helgason of Vopnafjörður, the less people would have known him beyond what is implicit in the name Víga-Bjarni, and this may well have encouraged a more bellicose portrayal of this man than was familiar to the people of Vopnafjörður, or than they chose to remember.¹³³

Furthermore, G.S. suggests that even the apparently least problematic signs of literary borrowing such close verbal correspondences need to be scrutinised and attention paid to the context in which they appear. So, while the 'patent and repeated verbal correspondences'¹³⁴ between sizeable passages are indeed likely indicators of literary relationships (just as the Latinate expressions and phrases specifically devised to aid chronological representation point to a written origin¹³⁵), such close correspondences over shorter pieces of text need not be. As an example, G.S. draws our attention to how Bergr's insult of Þorsteinn¹³⁶ in *Vatnsdæla saga*: 'Svínbeygða ek nú þann, sem æztr var af Vatnsdalur' ('I've now swine-bowed the one who was the highest of the house of Vatnsdalur') echoes the one that the legendary Danish king Hrólfr kraki directs at his enemy, the Swedish king Aðils in *Hrólfs saga kraka*: 'Svínbeygða ek nú þann sem Svíanna er ríkastr' ('I've now swine-bowed the one

¹³² Gísli Sigurðsson. 'Another Audience – Another Saga: How Can We Best Explain Different Accounts in *Vatnsdæla Saga* and *Finnboga Saga Ramma* of the Same Events?' in: Tristram, Hildegard L. C. ed. *Text und Zeittiefe*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994, pp. 359-375.

¹³³ Gísli Sigurðsson. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga And Oral Tradition. A Discourse on Method*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 156-157.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308. As an example of a clear case of borrowing between written sources, Gísli Sigurðsson cites *Landnámabók* (S 217) and *Grettis saga*, chapter 3 (*ÍF VIII:8*).

¹³⁵ 'Thus it should be taken as evidence of written literature when we meet phrases like 'nú ferr tvennum sögum fram' ('now two stories progress'), 'víkr nú sögunni til' ('now the story turns to'), 'nú er þar till at taka er áðr var frá horfit' ('now we must return to where we left off before').' (Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 31.)

¹³⁶ To atone for the his proud brother's offence against Bergr (and to prevent the cycle of vengeance from taking place), the temperate chieftain Þorsteinn is prepared to publicly humiliate himself by crawling under three arches of raised turf. Instead of Bergr appreciating this gesture of good will he chooses to add a verbal insult to this already humiliating act, thus starting a feud.

who is most powerful of the Swedes') and as told by Snorri Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál*: 'Svínbeygða hef ek nú þann er ríkastr er með Svíum!' ('I've now swine-bowed the one who is most powerful among the Swedes!')¹³⁷ As there are no other instances in *Vatnsdæla saga* that would point to a direct connection with *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the close verbal correspondence is here not necessarily the sign of a literary borrowing. Rather, it is more probable that this is 'a case of well-known quotation attached to a well-known incident going back to the common oral saga tradition'.¹³⁸ Such compact, well-wrought expressions as the above insult are highly memorable and, bearing in mind the economy and plasticity of oral traditions, would hardly go to waste, but would be applied in other appropriate contexts.

The second aspect Vésteinn Ólason mentions that makes the sagas traditional seems more fundamental, as it suggests that the very approach to creativity inherent in written medieval narratives is that present in oral cultures. Namely, medieval concepts of art emphasised the story as important, not the author, and appreciated the ingenuity of the variation more than what we would today call the originality, or novelty. These concepts are similar to the poetics of oral verbal art as they manifest an attitude towards tradition that is positive, and project a model of authorship as diligent apprenticeship, rather than Oedipal rebellion, the struggle with what Harold Bloom has famously termed 'the anxiety of influence'.¹³⁹

Assigning 'no role to the individual talent' (or at least not emphasising it in the way it is emphasised in modern cultures¹⁴⁰) was only one of the ways in which

¹³⁷ Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 316; Gísli Sigurðsson's translation.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316; Gísli Sigurðsson's translation.

¹³⁹ Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

¹⁴⁰ One would think that after the death of the Author has been proclaimed, His influence would wane, but the swelling biography and autobiography sections in bookshops and the book-promoting tours that every writer worth his/her salt is expected to take, seem to suggest the contrary: the cult of the Genius seems still live and kicking.

traditional medieval literature in general, and the sagas of Icelanders in particular, still adhered to the principles of oral verbal art. Manuscript production remained largely oral, both in the sense that ‘an early poet would write down a poem imagining himself declaiming it to an audience’¹⁴¹ and that medieval authors (‘auctors’) often composed their pieces aurally, i.e. dictating to scribes.¹⁴² In other words, in order to produce written literature one did not need to know how to read and write; at least initially, literacy develops as a craft¹⁴³ and scribes were hired much as one nowadays (unless an incorrigible DIY enthusiast) hires a plumber.

The transmission and reception of written works also in many ways remain oral since in medieval societies members of the audience would be predominantly illiterate and a written text would be read out loud for them. The inevitable consequence of this interfacial situation is that a written text then becomes absorbed back into the oral tradition and recycled.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, copying as a seemingly straightforward mode of literate transmission itself preserves some oral principles. Not only does the scribe often rehear and ‘reperform’ the text by mouthing the words as he writes,¹⁴⁵ but just like an oral poet or a storyteller he tends to deal with the traditional matter in a traditional way. As someone still very much immersed in the oral culture, the scribe remains faithful to the story, not the exact wording of the text he is copying. Rather than being enslaved by copying as a simple mechanical affair, Einar Ól. Sveinsson maintains that ‘the old Icelandic scribes had a certain freedom

¹⁴¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 95. See also p. 128, where Ong refers to Clanchy: ‘The eleventh-century Eadmer of St Albans says that, when he composed writing he felt he was dictating to himself’.

¹⁴² See *Ibid.*, p. 95. One such instance in which an author dictates to scribes is depicted in an illumination of the early fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript, *Reykjabók*. A good reproduction of this scene can be accessed online at:

<http://am.hi.is/handritinheima/handritid/skrifarar/skrif/skrifarar.htm>.

¹⁴³ On the development of ‘craft literacy’, see *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁴⁴ For some interesting examples of this phenomenon see the discussion on the textuality of Serbian epic poetry below.

¹⁴⁵ Doane, A. N. ‘Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts: Editing Old English’ in: Clayton, Jay, and Eric Rothstein, eds. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 80-81. See also Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 119.

towards the text, they were certainly interested in what they wrote'¹⁴⁶ and also suggests that 'in their extant form, very few sagas are anything like exact copies of the texts as they were first written'.¹⁴⁷ The extant saga manuscripts, Einar Ól. Sveinsson argues, show tendencies towards both abridgement and expansion, and in some cases they point to the existence of more than one written version of the saga. For example, the thirteenth-century fragment of *Egils saga* and the earliest surviving one (AM 162 A folio fragment theta, containing chapters 55-56 and 81-83) is characterised by a more verbose style than the later manuscripts of the same redaction (A),¹⁴⁸ while 'the B-redaction of the saga shows a tendency to abbreviate'¹⁴⁹ on the whole. Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes similar processes of condensation in the manuscript histories of *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, while 'the longer text of *Gísla saga* has been expanded'.¹⁵⁰ (*Gísla* is also an example of a saga that exists in two different versions.) The scribal changes can be slight or profuse, and can concern a more trivial aspect of the text such as phraseology (e.g. *Bandamanna saga*) or may involve the actual material (e.g. *Grettis saga*, *Ljósvetninga Saga*, *Harðar Saga*). While some saga manuscripts show a great degree of variation (again, *Bandamanna saga* manuscripts are a good example) others show a remarkable degree of consistency and stability (e.g. *Njáls saga* manuscripts). What would usually prompt a scribe to make changes, Einar Ól. Sveinsson argues, is knowledge of the material that has not been used by his predecessor (this knowledge

¹⁴⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga*. Reykjavík: H.F. Leiftur, 1953, p. 15.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ There exist three principal redactions (groups of closely related manuscripts) of *Egils saga* – A, B, and C. For more detail see Chesnutt, Michael and Bjarni Einarsson. eds. *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar A – Redaktionen*. København: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 2001.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. LXVI.

¹⁵⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*, p. 32.

might come from either oral tradition or another written source), difference of opinion about a person or event, or simply the level of artistic accomplishment:

The form of a saga might also vary in excellence. If it was composed with great skill in its plot, character-drawing, and style, people of later generations could more easily content with it, and it was then less likely that they would make radical changes. The manuscripts of *Njála*, *Egils Saga*, and *Laxdæla* seem to give evidence of this. On the other hand, it is easy to understand that defects in the form of a saga might incite people to change it.¹⁵¹

While the relatively lax attitude of the Icelandic scribes towards the particular saga text they were copying¹⁵² relates to oral creative principles in a recognisable way, the conscious pursuit of a perfect saga form seems a trait of written literature. However, the phenomenon of aesthetically highly accomplished forms showing more stability is known in oral verbal art too, and beyond the concept of formula. Jelka Redep, for example, notes how the late seventeenth- (or early eighteenth-) century anonymous biography of Prince Lazar, the so-called ‘Story of Kosovo Battle’ (‘Priča o boju kosovskom’), preserves interpolated verses from unrecorded folk poems ‘identical to those recorded by Vuk [Karadžić] a hundred years later’;¹⁵³ and Vladan Nedić gives examples of the remarkable impact that particular, exceptionally accomplished variants that came from Karadžić’s best singers had on their successors - e.g. poems published in 1897 in Matica Hrvatska collections show that nearly whole of Tešan Podrugović’s variants, ‘especially those about Marko Kraljević, singers knew by heart’.¹⁵⁴ This, however, has little to do with piety the other singers would have felt towards Podrugović personally – the kind of worship of the Author’s person that is

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵² In Iceland, as elsewhere in Europe, the relatively relaxed attitude to the text copied is considerably more characteristic of the vernacular rather than ecclesiastical writing. It is perhaps interesting to note that oral texts too show a greater degree of stability across the variants if their subject is religious/ritualistic. See for example Finnegan’s discussion of Vedic poetry (Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 135-136) and Chafe on the Seneca ritual language (Chafe in Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 64).

¹⁵³ Redep, ‘The Legend’, p. 260.

¹⁵⁴ ‘[Скоро целе његове текстове,] нарочито оне о Марку Краљевићу, певачи су знали напамет.’ Недић, Владан. *Вукови певачи*. Београд: Рад, 1990, p. 37.

present in print-cultures even though the death of this figure has been announced some time ago – but with the memorability of Podrugović's versions themselves. As Albert B. Lord notes, in cases of the greater stability of an oral text, the question is not so much of the singer *memorising* the poem, but simply *remembering* it.¹⁵⁵ The difference between the two processes is that the first implies a conscious effort, while the second does not.

With the scribes working with the written medium under these, still oral, precepts and attitudes to art render the very notion of the 'original' or 'prototype saga' obsolete, if not absurd. As A. N. Doane points out, in these circumstances, the change a scribe procures does not, '*in and of itself constitute corruption nor does it imply a less "authorized" text*'.¹⁵⁶ Rather, the supposed copy itself becomes an original¹⁵⁷ of sorts, a valid variation. Instead of a text as a discrete entity, a fixed object, the medieval traditional narrative, a saga, just as an oral epic poem, becomes an entity distributed across its various (oral and manuscript) instances of realisation – it becomes a 'multiform'¹⁵⁸ that forever exists as a potentiality.

c) *Textuality*¹⁵⁹ of Serbian oral epic poetry

Just as the sagas do not constitute a written literature unconditionally, so is the orality of the Serbian epic poems that are going to be discussed here not entirely

¹⁵⁵ Lord, Albert Bates. *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ Doane, 'Oral Texts', p. 93.

¹⁵⁷ These texts are also unique through their very materiality as *manuscripts*: both in the sense that they are unique surfaces made up of sheep and calf skins, with various blemishes, holes, pores, hair, razor marks, and also as uniquely performed entities borne out of a 'somatic gesture': handwritten, illuminated, with lacunae and idiosyncratic comments added in the margins. See Doane, 'Oral Texts', p. 85.

¹⁵⁸ This is how Albert B. Lord describes *oral* texts. See Lord, *Singer of Tales*, p. 100.

¹⁵⁹ For the lack of a more suitable term, 'textuality' is here (as in other studies of oral and oral-derived literature) used as an antonym to orality. What makes this usage particularly unfortunate and places some urgency on this area to come up with a more appropriate term, is the success with which the Structuralist and Poststructuralist theories show how nearly everything that can be read/interpreted (e.g. body, environment) can also be conceived of as text.

unambiguous. One obvious way to challenge the purity of the songs' orality would be by tracing the possible written sources. We have already mentioned Banašević's and Vaillant's claims as to the epic songs' connection to the French *chansons de geste*.¹⁶⁰ Other, even more likely influences include the *Bible*, Serbian medieval chronicles and biographies, or *žitija* (e.g. the influence of the Patriarch Danilo II's fourteenth-century *A Word on Prince Lazar* on the Kosovo cycle; Kosovo poems' adoption of the slandered hero motif that first appears in the fifteenth-century biography of Lazar's son, Despot Stefan, written by his tutor, Konstantin the Philosopher¹⁶¹), legal writings (e.g. punishments that befall some miscreants show a correspondence with those listed in Tsar Dušan's Law¹⁶²), as well as Croatian Baroque historiographies (e.g. it is only after Mauro Orbini's negative portrayal of Vuk Branković in *Il regno degli Slavi* that he becomes the arch-traitor of the Kosovo poems¹⁶³), etc., but also European medieval epics and romances, Byzantine legends and Oriental sources. For instance, Svetozar Matić notes a similarity between the foundling Momir in the song recorded from Blind Živana (*Momir the Foundling*) and the foundling Mimir from the *Nibelungenlied*,¹⁶⁴ whereas Tomo Maretić draws a connection between Tsar Dušan's scheming and slandering viziers depicted in the same poem and 'The Story of the Ten Viziers' from the *1001 Nights*, a story that has most probably reached the Balkan Slavs via a Byzantine legend.¹⁶⁵ Svetozar Koljević also notes how the words of the battle-shy Captain Ćurčija from Višnjić's *Battle on Čokešina*: 'For I am not a willow tree,/ To sprout new branches when I am cut down/ And be a willow as it was before' ('Јер ја нисам дрво врбовина,/ Кад пос'јеку да с'

¹⁶⁰ See note 44 above.

¹⁶¹ See Redep, 'The Legend', pp. 256 - 257.

¹⁶² See Матицки, Миодраг. *Поновнице: Типови односа усмене и писане књижевности*. Нови Сад: Књижевна заједница Новог Сада, 1989, p. 37.

¹⁶³ See Redep, 'The Legend', p. 260.

¹⁶⁴ See note 27 in Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 115.

¹⁶⁵ See note 28 in Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 115.

омладит могу,/ Па да будем врба, к'о и била'),¹⁶⁶ closely echo those that the fifteenth-century chronicler, Konstantin Mihailović from Ostrovica, reports to have been uttered by Duke Krajmir while advising his liege, Prince Lazar, not to defy his powerful captors: 'the head is not like the stump of a willow tree to sprout the second time'.¹⁶⁷ Both, Koljević observes, ultimately have roots in the *Bible* (Job 14:7).¹⁶⁸

Tracing these and suchlike leads would be a rewarding if ample task, provided one is interested in the mobility of themes and motives, as well as the metamorphoses that stories go through in different cultural contexts. In terms of challenging the orality of Serbian epics, however, the venture is likely to prove more elusive than promising, not least because most of the written sources mentioned above would take us full circle back to the oral traditions in which they have roots themselves. But even if they did not, the fact remains that these stories were received by the illiterate singers¹⁶⁹ aurally and therefore treated as any other oral material. As we have noted above, in cases where oral and literate cultures coexist, what often happens is that a written text becomes absorbed into an oral tradition and recycled, and vice versa. A good example for this is that of Andrija Kačić-Miošić, an eighteenth-century Dalmatian Franciscan monk who, in emulation of the folk tradition, published a book of his own epic poems, trying along the way to harmonise their content with the available historical and pseudo-historical writings covering the same theme. Miodrag Maticki notes that at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kačić-Miošić's *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* ('A Pleasant Conversation of the Slavonic People') was the most read

¹⁶⁶ *Бој на Чокешици* in: Караџић, Вук Стефановић. *Српске народне пјесме*. Vol. IV, Београд: Просвета, 1976, p. 125; Koljević's translation (Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 285).

¹⁶⁷ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 285.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹⁶⁹ The above mentioned singers, Filip Višjić and Živana, were not only illiterate but also blind – reading would have been physically impossible.

book after the *Bible* in the regions of Southern Austria occupied by the Serbs (today's Vojvodina in northern Serbia, and Slavonija, Krajina and Lika in Croatia).¹⁷⁰ Kačić-Miošić's poems have become so popular among the common folk that they were taken back into the oral tradition and kept undergoing new, oral, renderings. Svetozar Koljević observes a similar development regarding *Osman*, an epic written by a distinguished seventeenth-century poet from Dubrovnik, Ivan Gundulić, and inspired by Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated*. Loaded with allusions to the Italian Renaissance epic as well as the Greek and Roman classics (the staple reading diet of the Dalmatian and Dubrovnik poets such as Gundulić and Kačić-Miošić), *Osman* was "translated" into oral folk epic idiom and sung in the neighbouring area of the Bay of Kotor',¹⁷¹ unwittingly, but also inevitably, absorbing some of Gundulić's vast *literary* referential field.

At the same time, one needs to be cautious not to overemphasise the role of these written sources: the composition itself is still executed under the aegis of oral poetics. A particular written story/motif is cut off from its immediate origins and converted into an oral formulaic idiom; it is adjusted to fit within the larger framework of the existing traditional narratives and is treated like one, with little attention paid to particular wording. Through further oral incarnations and in the changing contexts, it becomes ever more malleable. Consequently, in an attempt to base an interpretation of, let us say, the aforementioned *Momir the Foundling* on the results of various source hunts, one would soon run into difficulties. The Oriental fairytale ends happily, whereas our two ill-fated siblings die, with a pine tree growing from Momir's and the vine from Grozdana's grave: 'The vine has wound around the pine-tree,/ Like the sister's arm around her brother' ('Савила се лоза око

¹⁷⁰ Матицки, *Поновнице*, p. 50.

¹⁷¹ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 2. Koljević's example originates with Milorad Pavić; see note 4 on p. 2.

бора,/ К'о сестрина око брата рука').¹⁷² The transformation of human beings into plants brings to mind Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but why stop there? Instead of trying to unearth some Adriatic connection with Ovid behind our poem, why not posit common (or cognate) myths behind both? Ovid has certainly inherited his myths from the Greek and Roman lore, and with the Balkan Slavs living in close contact with Byzantium, their traditions could have easily absorbed them as well. But then, what about Old Slavonic myths? Could the scene be a sentimental rendering, a remnant, of a rather 'pragmatic' and non-moralistic pagan practice of growing plants on graves in order to keep the deceased's soul trapped safely in their root, preventing it from wandering among the living and causing trouble?¹⁷³ Does the scene have something to do with the belief that the plants are there to testify to the pair's innocence?¹⁷⁴ Are we talking about a combination of oral and written sources, or simply a convergence? Of course, a definitive answer to these questions is unlikely to be found, and what is more important, it is immaterial: in a new context, the scene has acquired new meanings; it demands a treatment in its own right, and the recourse to any particular origin does nothing to engage its poignancy.

Another possible way of challenging the orality of Serbian epics stems from the very paradox of calling these poems 'oral', when the only way we can access them nowadays is either in print, or as good as in print but in, admittedly, more evocative settings: Serbian and Montenegrin national celebrations and country fairs, from the moustached mouths of fellows who, however skilfully fingering their

¹⁷² *Наход Момир in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 126.*

¹⁷³ See Чајкановић, Vol. 5, p. 93.

¹⁷⁴ There are innumerable instances in Serbian folk poetry where out of the righteous and wronged peoples' graves grow noble plants, whereas thorns and nettles grow out of the graves of sinners, a stylistic illumination, Koljević notes, of 'the patriarchal sense of cosmic harmony'. See Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 114.

*gusle*¹⁷⁵ and however impressively looking in their brand new national costumes, are still only reproducing Karadžić's printed versions. Not improvising, not recreating, not composing – reproducing.¹⁷⁶ Orality, of course, depends on continuous performance, while the texts we are dealing with here are the variants that Vuk Stefanović Karadžić¹⁷⁷ chose to put down on paper in the nineteenth century. Hence, their state resembles that of a butterfly pinned down and showcased. The beauty of the butterfly lies not merely in the arrangement of pigments on its wings (the beauty to which life is sacrificed), but is also distributed across its movements, its various instances: now settled on a flower, now swiftly darting away, now hovering nervously. Even though this Protean multiformity¹⁷⁸ is now irretrievably lost to Serbian epics, it is important to note that the translation from one medium to another is not all about loss. For one, 'the synchronic snapshots of a diachronic process'¹⁷⁹ that they are, we are still grateful to have these fixed versions, just as we are indebted

¹⁷⁵ A one- or two-stringed instrument, used as an accompaniment to epic singing among the Southern Slavs.

¹⁷⁶ Lord considered these 'counterfeits masquerading as epic bards' as a special 'menace to the collector'. See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 137.

¹⁷⁷ Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787 -1864) was the nineteenth-century reformer of the Serbian language. The discrepancy between the unregulated contemporary written language (*slavenoserbski* – an amalgam of the Serbian Church Slavonic and the Russian Church Slavonic) and the one spoken by the majority of people was great, and it was this self-taught scholar who had fought and eventually won the battle for the people's language and the phonetic principle in spelling: 'write as you speak, read as it is written'. Although his efforts at reformation and standardisation of language are generally lauded, Karadžić has also been criticised for some of the rushed, even dogmatic blanket policies regarding the break with *slavenoserbski* (the vocabulary relating to abstract concepts has particularly suffered as a result). Karadžić was also the first systematically to collect Serbian folk literature, and even the fiercest critics of his reforms such as Jovan Skerlić (see Скерлић, Јован. *Историја нове српске књижевности*. Београд: Просвета, 1964), still highly praise this aspect of Vuk's activity. Among the many of the admirers of Karadžić's work were the famous German Romantics, J. W. Goethe and Jakob Grimm. Goethe had even learnt the language in order to enjoy the literature in the original and translate it, while the Grimms advised Vuk concerning the way of collecting and editing the material. For a recent appraisal of Karadžić's work see Делић, Јован. *Традиција и Вук Стефановић Караџић*. Београд: БИГЗ, 1990.

¹⁷⁸ See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 100. Also see p. 124.

¹⁷⁹ Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 4. In the context of Cilliers's study, the above quote relates to the analysis of a complex system (e.g. neural networks, organisms, cultures, etc.) that fails to engage with its time dimension. Any such analysis would, according to Cilliers, be incomplete because one of the defining features of complex systems is the fact that they have history. If we take the tradition to be such a complex system, the 'pinned down poem' is but a still image, a 'snapshot' of a particular moment of its existence within the tradition.

to a butterfly collector who may have not been able to capture the butterfly in all its glory, but has still managed to preserve a specimen of a now extinct variety.

Furthermore, just as the shape and the size of the butterfly's wings tell the story of its movements while its colours and patterns suggest something about its environment and stealth strategies, so do the traditional structures in a particular poem and across the poems collected point to their earlier multiform and evanescent mode of existence. In other words, although the 'pinned down' poem indeed becomes 'a fact of written literature', provided it has been recorded faithfully, it also, as Maticki points out, partly remains 'a written testimony about a live oral tradition'.¹⁸⁰

The question that now arises is just how faithfully our songs have been recorded, and also, how strong Karadžić's editorial stamp was, i.e. to what extent the poems are textualised by the imposition of a 'chooser', an overarching, writer-like authority. Considering the work of his predecessors, collectors of oral poetry, Albert B. Lord expressed doubts as to the possibility of adequately recording a poem without the aid of audio technology. Indeed, as Vuk Karadžić has noted himself, whenever he encountered poets who could 'only sing',¹⁸¹ the recording process was rather painstaking and would involve many repeated performances, as the singers were more meditatively engaged with the song and more prone to confusion if required to pause, or generally slow down. Vuk's most notorious case in this respect was the otherwise exceptionally gifted singer, Starac¹⁸² Milija ('Old Milija'), who would not even start singing without a taste of *rakija* (brandy); but then, after a sip out of his flask, he would

¹⁸⁰ Матицки, *Поновнице*, p. 16.

¹⁸¹ '[...] само певати;' Караџић, 'Предговор', Vol. IV, p. 367.

¹⁸² Literally translated, 'starac' means 'an old man', but when it is used as a part of a proper name, like in Milija and Raško's case, it is an honorary title bestowed only on 'the wise man and the sage who knew the tradition'. See Lutovac in Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 314.

already weakened, partly by his old age, partly by his wounds (his head was all in cuts gained during fighting with some Turks from Kolašin some time ago), get so confused, that he sometimes did not even manage to sing in the right order!¹⁸³

It took Vuk fifteen days to record four poems by Milija, with *Banović Strahinja* considered by many as ‘the greatest single epic poem in the language’,¹⁸⁴ and the striking example of the extent to which tradition can, rather than constrict, give wings to the individual talent.

Even in these difficult circumstances Vuk seems to have managed to record the poem in a manner that would at least satisfy the singers themselves. They would often ask him to read the poem back to them, and ‘as they rejoiced hearing it the way they know it’, they would, Vuk wrote, ‘be wondering just as much at how I could write it all down like that’.¹⁸⁵ But the recording process was not necessarily always as difficult as in Milija’s case, since not all singers had the same style of delivery. There were people who could both sing and recite their poetry, and some, like Vuk’s favourite, Tešan Podrugović, actually only recited. Apart from his extraordinary talent and the rather impressive repertoire (in excess of a hundred poems), what also distinguished Podrugović was his ability to remain alert throughout the recording process (‘he thought about what he was saying’¹⁸⁶) and that he could speak his poems ‘as though [reading] from a book’.¹⁸⁷ In such circumstances, the advantages of the audio equipment are not that obvious. In fact, as a collector, Karadžić had had advantages that were, in turn, denied to Parry and Lord, or any modern folklorist for that matter. While the two famous scholars worked with a tradition that was on the

¹⁸³ ‘[...А како мало сркне ракије, он се,] и онако, које од старости, које од рана (јер му је сва глава била исечена тукући се негда с некаквим Турцима из Колашина) слаб будући, тако забуну, да није свагда редом знао ни певати!’ Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol. IV, p. 367.

¹⁸⁴ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 315.

¹⁸⁵ ‘[...] толико су се чудили како сам ја све тако могао написати.’ See note **) in Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol. IV, p. 367.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Мислио је, шта говори,’ Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol. IV, p. 365.

¹⁸⁷ ‘[...]него је пјесме казивао] као из књиге,’ Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol. I, p. 537.

wane, Karadžić had worked with(in) it when it was in full bloom. His position among the collectors of folk poetry is unique in that, unlike his Romantic predecessors (e.g. his mentors and admirers, the Brothers Grimm), and unlike his successors such as Parry and Lord, Vuk was not facing the cultural 'other' while collecting. Born in Herzegovina, the cradle of oral epic singing, with his grandfather and uncle both accomplished singers, Vuk had the kind of intimate, intuitive understanding of the tradition that comes only from being a part of it.¹⁸⁸ His ear already attuned to the decasyllabic metre (often anticipating the singer's next word), with the rapport that came naturally (his western, Romantic, education¹⁸⁹ came only in his mature years), Karadžić did not necessarily always have to struggle in order to record poems. In other words, he was not only the collector, but as Jovan Skerlić notes, 'in a sense also a co-worker of the folk singer'.¹⁹⁰ Hence, despite the pencil and paper in his hands, dressed like a local, he could hope to elicit more spontaneous performances from his singers: recognising the collector as one of their own, the singers would concentrate on the poem rather than the ways of impressing a learned foreign man with his fancy town clothes and his formidable audio gadgets.

Bearing his dual cultural identity in mind, the question of Vuk's personal stamp on the collections that he had published becomes a very interesting one. Indeed, although in addition to his own collecting efforts, he enlisted the help of other literate

¹⁸⁸ Jovan Skerlić writes: 'He [Vuk] had in himself something of the common folk, and after fifty years of living abroad he remained the people's man. He felt folk poetry deeply in his soul and understood it better than any of the contemporary Serbian writers.' ('Сам он имао је у себи нечег дубоко народног, и после педесетогодишњег борављења у туђини остао је народни човек. Народну поезију је осећао у дубини своје душе и разумевао боље но ико од савремених писаца српских.') See Скерлић, *Историја*, p. 249.

¹⁸⁹ The word 'education' is not to be understood here in any institutionalised sense. For the most part Vuk was self-taught and has benefited from contact with various educated people in Vienna where he had found refuge after the crush of the First Serbian Uprising. The person who has influenced Vuk the most (including the suggestion to start collecting folk poetry) was a Slovene scholar working as a censor at the Austrian court, Jernej Kopitar. Kopitar introduced Vuk to Jakob Grimm and J. W. Goethe as well as to the ideas of European Romanticism.

¹⁹⁰ Скерлић, *Историја*, p. 249.

people (teachers, village chiefs, merchants, even the eminent members of clergy and royalty, such as the abbot of the monastery of Šišatovac, Lukijan Mušicki and the Montenegrin Prince-Bishop, Petar II Petrović Njegoš), it is known that he was rather autocratic as an editor, both in terms of making the ultimate decision as to what of the collected material was good enough to be published and what was not, and also in that he repeatedly stressed to his associates to refrain from making any ‘corrections’ to the text they were writing down. If there were any to be made, he felt he needed to make them himself.¹⁹¹ It is, nevertheless, very important not to make too much of Vuk’s autocracy in both of these cases. Firstly, his main concern was to preserve the authenticity of the texts as much as possible, which is perhaps a justifiable concern considering that the tendency of literate amateur collectors (most of them coming from the regions where the epic singing was dying out, and where their schooling actively created a rift with the tradition) has generally been to adjust what they considered coarse in folk literature to the contemporary literary taste and the sense of propriety.¹⁹² Furthermore, as the popularity of folk literature in general and Serbian epic poetry in particular grew in cultured Europe, many local and foreign literate poets were induced to pass their own compositions off as folk literature (e.g. Prosper Mérimée’s 1827 ‘collection’ of the supposedly oral poetry from Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia and Herzegovina, *La Guzla*). Secondly, regarding Vuk’s own editorial interventions, even if these were many and significant (and so far as we can tell they were not),¹⁹³ they still need not have been automatically

¹⁹¹ See Караџић Вук Стефановић. ‘Предговор’ in: *Народне српске приповјетке*. Београд: Просвета, 1969, p. 50.

¹⁹² Even more informed collectors such as the Brothers Grimm, have succumbed to the pressure to adapt their material to the taste of their reading public (e.g. consider the differences between the later, euphemised versions of the fairytales and the earlier published darker, more provocative versions).

¹⁹³ What remains of Vuk’s manuscripts (once the poems were published, he tended to destroy his manuscripts – from his perspective, they had served their purpose) points to the conclusion that the changes to the recorded texts that he had introduced himself were scarce and of cosmetic nature, involving mainly ‘substitutions to metrical biforms and minor syntactic adjustments, with an added

fraudulent. As Mirjana Detelić reminds us, what often gets overlooked in the cultures where a living oral tradition did not thrive as recently as it did in the Yugoslav lands is that

anyone, even a literate, wholly legitimate individual can be an epic singer in both senses (as the creator and transmitter) if at least three conditions are met: 1) anonymity (i.e. the negation of authorship), 2) adherence to the oral idiom and poetics (that is, the generic constants) and 3) further life of the creation (i.e. the possibility for the performers to accept and transmit it). *That means that the activity of collectors and editors, so long as it fulfils these criteria, comes into the ontic component of an oral (then recorded and published) text.*¹⁹⁴

Being thoroughly immersed in the oral tradition and fulfilling the above criteria, Karažić's 'personal stamp' would therefore not jeopardise the poems' orality in any fundamental way. At the very most, it would have been as strong as that of the last singer to contribute to the development of a poem (already shaped by the networks of singers over centuries) before it is finally written down and set in print. To a degree, this is also true of his role as a selector of the variants worthy of print and particular singers. In both cases his personal taste would have been very much conditioned by the communal taste: i.e. Vuk's aesthetic criteria would have been informed by the tradition, and the singers he engaged were those considered best in their craft by their own communities. At the same time, the fact that he was also a man with a highly developed literary taste should not be underestimated. As Vuk had himself testified,

line or substituted hemistich every seventy-five to one hundred lines.' (Foley, John Miles. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 114.) On Karažić's editorial practices see also Foley, John Miles, 'Literary Art and Oral Tradition in Old English and Serbian Poetry.' *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1983, 12, pp. 183-214 (especially, pp. 192-194).

¹⁹⁴ '[C]вако, па и писмен, потпуно легитимисан појединац може бити епски певач у оба смисла (као творац и као преносилац) уколико се задовоље најмање три услова: 1) анонимност (тј. одрицање од ауторства), 2) поштовање усменог идиoma и поетике (одн. жанровских константи) дате форме традиционалне књижевности и 3) даљи живот такве творевине (тј. могућност да је извођачи прихвате и преносе). То значи да и дејство скупљача и приређивача, све док задовољава ове услове, улази у онтичку компоненту усменог (па забележеног и објављеног) текста.' Детелић, *Урок и невеста*, p. 22, my emphasis.

the best poem for him is the one that ‘both the learned man can read and the simple man can listen to’.¹⁹⁵ The poem, then, should be faithful to tradition, and at the same time appeal to a literary taste. But the demands placed here are not necessarily contradictory: it was Vuk’s belief that ‘every folk song is good and beautiful, one only needs to find the right singer that knows it the way it should be’.¹⁹⁶ Taking into account the unprecedented scale of Karadžić’s undertaking (he invested a lifetime in collecting these songs and did so at the time the tradition was at its peak, yielding an extraordinary amount of material), considering the remarkably large and diverse pool of singers to choose from, it should not be surprising if Vuk indeed managed to find ‘the right singer’ for a sizeable body of the poems he published.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the textuality of Serbian epics lies precisely in the intensity with which the individual talent emerges from the tradition, in the pronounced presence of the original and the unique alongside the traditional and the formulaic. Of course, it would be naïve to assume that, because of their reliance on set phrases, themes and rhythms for composition, oral literatures are bereft of invention. As Svetozar Koljević observes, if the gifted singers were not able to appropriate the traditional idiom to unique situations and experiences, if the epic language were ‘not formulopoeic’¹⁹⁷ as well as formulaic, it would be difficult indeed to imagine how a single formula could have come into being’.¹⁹⁸ It would likewise be naïve to assume that with reliance on the formulaic ready-made ‘building blocks’ good oral poetry is simply manufactured, even if, to a certain extent, everyone was expected to be versed in the traditional idiom. As will be discussed in more detail in

¹⁹⁵ ‘[...] и учен читати и и прост слушати.’ Караџић, ‘Предговор’, in *Народне српске приповјетке*, pp. 47–48.

¹⁹⁶ ‘[Ја мислим, да је] свака народна песма добра и лепа, само ваља наћи правога певача, који је зна, као што треба.’ Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol IV, p. 378.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Formula-making’.

¹⁹⁸ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 334.

the second chapter of this study, formulae are no more building blocks and no more creatively restrictive than are musical notes, or the words in a language. For a good song to come into being, the mechanical stringing of formulae is far from being enough¹⁹⁹ (although the importance of even such bad performances for the survival of the formulae, as well as the song itself, should not be underestimated); talented individuals are always needed to manipulate the medium, explore its possibilities. Vuk Karadžić was well aware of this when he wrote: 'To a man who knows fifty different poems (if he is cut out for the job) it is easy to compose a new one'.²⁰⁰ The birth of a new song is very much dependent on singer's thorough knowledge and control of the traditional idiom, but he also needs to be gifted, 'cut out for the job'.

Moreover, like in modern societies, gifted oral poets only seldom turn out to be well-adjusted average Joes. Often, as is the case with Vuk's singers, they are exceptional individuals, sometimes even slightly eccentric (consider for example Podrugović's famous scowl while he told funny stories, or Old Milija's going against the social norm by refusing to share his flask round),²⁰¹ often living on the fringes of society, and/or deeply scarred by personal tragedies and loss. Tešan Podrugović and Stojan Hajduk were both outlaws and rebels. Defined (and firmly circumscribed) by her role as a homemaker, a woman in patriarchal society would hardly be expected to leave the bounds of her village, not to mention to go unaccompanied as far as Bulgaria like Blind Živana did, but then again, Živana is a not just any woman: disabled by her blindness and so unable to fit in the role of a woman in a patriarchal

¹⁹⁹ Karadžić gives some vivid examples of such poems ridden with contradictions (e.g. about a poor mother forced to work very hard to bring up her child, and yet the child all along sleeps in a cradle made of gold), and all patched up from the pieces of various other poems. See Караџић, 'Предговор', Vol. IV, pp. 378-379.

²⁰⁰ 'Који човек зна педесет различни пјесама, (ако је за тај посао) њему је ласно нову пјесму спјевати.' Караџић, 'Предговор', Vol. I, p. 530.

²⁰¹ On personal traits and techniques of singers see Koljević, *The Epic*, pp. 299-343. Also see Караџић, 'Предговор', Vol. IV, pp. 363-382; and Неђић, *Вукови певачи*.

society, she was trained as a singer and left to fend for herself, making a living from her art. Like Filip Višnjić and other blind singers, she was forced to spend most of her life on the move in pursuit of bread, finding temporary shelter in monasteries throughout the region, diversifying the repertoire to meet the demands of various audiences (Višnjić's included Muslim epics, as he had occasionally performed in front of the Bosnian agas and beys.²⁰²) Standing up to the brutality and rape to which their local Turkish overlords subjected members of their families (the terror was most probably imposed as a reaction to the success of the rebellion against Turkish rule in Serbia) by killing the perpetrators, the farmers Old Raško and Old Milija were in their autumn years forced to flee their homes in Herzegovina and seek refuge over the Drina in Serbia. The exceptional circumstances and extraordinary lifestyles must have equipped these singers with alternative, in many ways unique, perspectives on current events as well as forced new interpretations of those of the past. Comparing the singers' experiences and their repertoires, it is perhaps no small wonder that the favourite hero of Tešan Podrugović is Marko Kraljević in whose rendering this medieval nobleman is more evocative of a nineteenth-century rebel; that Živana's most poignant pieces explore the family life of which she was deprived, and exude Christian values to which she was exposed in the monasteries and in which she may have found solace; that despite being the singer of the Serbian Insurrections, Višnjić's songs show affinities with the long, episodic epics of the Bosnian Muslims, as well as the ability to empathise with the defeated enemy; that among the most vivid scenes Old Milija has painted are those of ravaged homes, of utter loneliness and desolation. While oral art is communal, it nevertheless relies on a gifted individual to revitalise it, to generate the contagious changes – the changes both

²⁰² Turkish (in this case Muslim Slavic) officials and nobleman.

strange enough to be memorable and familiar enough to be accepted as the part of tradition and carried on further in time and space.

Granting the importance of a certain degree of novelty and singer's talent alongside the mastery of traditional idiom in all oral literatures, Serbian epics still seem to display an unusual degree of invention of the kind we expect to find in written literature, even in comparison to their closest relatives such as the epic songs of Bosnian Muslims. As John Miles Foley notes:

No feature so tellingly differentiates the two forms as the relative measure of *tradition* versus *textuality*. Whereas the Moslem epic depends directly, crucially, and nearly exclusively on the immanent, unspoken tradition for the quickening of any given performance into narrative life, the Christian epic – generally short, spare, and integral enough to allow the poet a greater exercise of individual artistic sense – combines the referentiality inherent in its traditional structures with the signature of its most immediate maker. The Christian songs, which some have understood as memorized and then “worked on” or “revised” as mental palimpsests, are, to put it somewhat more suggestively, in certain ways more like our familiar literary works.²⁰³

Before we discuss the possible reasons for this difference (including the ones offered by Foley above), let us briefly consider the forms these original contributions tend to take.²⁰⁴ These could be as short as the striking one-liners such as Milija's memorable and unique opening of *Banović Strahinja*, the most succinct yet the most powerful introduction to a hero: ‘Strahinjić Ban was a somebody’ (‘Нетко бјеше Страхинићу

²⁰³ Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 97.

²⁰⁴ This, of course, is made possible since Vuk took care to write down some of the names, short biographies as well as notes on style and repertoires of the singers who dictated him their songs, enabling us to isolate personal contributions of Karadžić's singers by comparing their variants to those haphazardly jotted down in an occasional sixteenth-, seventeenth-, or eighteenth-century personal scrap book (often alongside love ditties, medical and culinary recipes, spells and charms), as well as the sizeable eighteenth-century collection (c. 1720), compiled by an anonymous Austrian civil servant in the region of Krajina (‘military border’), the *Erlangen Manuscript*. Other comparative material would be that gathered by the collectors that came after Vuk (e.g. Matica Hrvatska collections, Valtazar Bogišić's collection of the sixteenth-century *bugarštice*, variants recorded in Macedonia by the Brothers Miladinov, etc.).

бане')²⁰⁵ or Višnjić's image of the constant struggle of the rebels symbolised in the never-ceasing fire from their guns: 'they tied the red flame into the sky' ('црвен пламен до неба свезали')²⁰⁶; or, they can involve long episodes, such as the meeting of Banović Strahinja (as he enters the Turkish camp to rescue his abducted wife) with the former captive to whom he had shown kindness, an old dervish. Let down by his own family in this venture, he finds in the dervish an unlikely helper, and more: if for a moment the two enemies, both destined to loneliness, become the two closest beings on earth through sharing their stories of ravaged homes. Building the subtle portrayals of characters (such as Milija's old dervish) is another way in which the singer's personal touch is felt. For example, in the eighteenth-century *Erlangen Manuscript* variant of the *Death of Duke Prijezda*, the wife of the brave duke, Vidosava, is a silent, passive figure who duly plunges to her death after her husband (outnumbered by the Turks, and having already destroyed his horse and his sabre to prevent them from falling into his enemy's hands), bids her join him: 'Vidosava, my faithful love,/ come, love, into the water Morava,/ so that the Turkish Tsar may not have you, my dear' ('витосаво върна любо моя/ аиди любо у мораву воду/ да те душо турски ц'рь не люби').²⁰⁷ In the version of Blind Jeca/ Jelisaveta (the apprentice of Živana), both characters are given fuller, psychologically motivated portrayals. Firstly, Prijezda does not simply order his wife to jump off the battlements into the river. Unlike his *Erlangen* counterpart, Jeca's Prijezda seems to perceive his wife as a human being (not a possession of the same rank as his horse and the sabre that he destroys) who must have a choice: 'Would you rather die along

²⁰⁵ Бановић Страхинја. In: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 191.

²⁰⁶ Бој на Лозници. In: Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 183, Koljević's translation (Koljević, *The Epic*, p.341).

²⁰⁷ *Ерлангенски рукопис старих српскохрватских народних песама*. Герхард Геземан, ed. Сремски Карловци: Српска манастирска штампарија, 1925, p. 95. I have tried, so much as it was possible, to present the original Cyrillic characters as they appear in the printed version of the manuscript. In a few cases, however, I had to use the closest characters available to me ('ъ' in 'върна', and 'я' in 'моя' are slightly different in the original).

with me,/ or be a faithful love to the Turk?’ (‘Или волиш са мною погинути,/ ил’ Турчину бити љуба верна?’).²⁰⁸ The wife (in this version, perhaps not accidentally, named Jela/Jelica²⁰⁹) whose active presence is felt throughout the poem (e.g. it was she who discovers the hidden Turks in the crypts of their castle, realising that her husband’s warriors will be overpowered), not only accepts to join him, but utters the final climactic words as the couple part from this world: ‘The Morava water nourished us,/ let the Morava water bury us’ (‘Морава нас вода одранила,/ нек Морава вода и сарани’).²¹⁰ This gnomic parallelism and the wordplay of the phonetically and etymologically related verbs *odraniti/ saraniti* (‘to nourish’/ ‘to bury’) are not to be found anywhere else in the corpus.

More often, however, the originality of the contribution is not reflected in such novel material, but in the way singers bounce off, and sometimes even subvert the existing formulae. John Foley gives a thorough account of such instances in Višnjić’s poem *The Death of Kraljević Marko*, where, for example, the whole elaborate formula of the hero dressing/ arming himself and readying his horse is inverted (the hero is disarming himself, destroying his status symbols), as he readies himself for death, ‘this greatest of challenges’.²¹¹ In Milija’s version of *Banović Strahinja*, instead of jumping ‘to his nimble feet’ (‘на ноге лагане’) upon receiving devastating news about the destruction of his home, as is the usual reaction of heroes in his position, Strahinja is instead paralysed in his seat, ‘his dark moustaches he hung low/ the dark moustaches dropped upon his shoulders/ his countenance showed a fierce frown/ his tears were just about to flow’ (‘мрке брке ниско објесио,/ мрки

²⁰⁸ *Смрт војводе Пријезде* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 359.

²⁰⁹ Blind Jeca (short for Jelena/Jelisaveta) indeed lends her own name to the heroine. At the same time, it should be noted that this name is usually borne by faithful wives in the tradition.

²¹⁰ *Смрт војводе Пријезде*, pp. 359 - 360.

²¹¹ Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 132.

брци пали на рамена,/ у образ се љуто намрдио,/ готове му сузе ударити’).²¹² The effect is here achieved by consciously avoiding the formula and yet counting on the audience’s expectation of it: so greatly overwhelmed is Strahinja with the mixture of anger and pain (a stroke of genius in its own right), that he completely fails to react as is socially expected of him.²¹³

Foley’s explanation of the high degree of song-specific inventions in Serbo-Croat Christian epic – that the size of the poems makes them particularly conducive to exercise of the singers’ individual artistry, as well as the one he adopts from James Holoka (the songs are short, so they can be memorised and worked on ‘as mental palimpsests’), while reasonable and valid, only go so far, however. For one, the fact that the poems are relatively short and easier to memorise equally lends itself to a contrary interpretation: shorter poems, precisely because they are easier to memorise are likely to achieve greater stability, remain unchanged for generations.²¹⁴

Furthermore, in order to be able to remember all the inventions added (if these were in any way the singers’ goal), it is logical to expect that the singers would endeavour to keep their own versions relatively short, yet Milija’s version of *Banović Strahinja* (the most ‘literary’ of the existing versions), runs over eight hundred lines. Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration, involves the already mentioned exceptional circumstance, the role of sheer chance. The first aspect of it concerns the extent to which the recorded poems as ‘synchronic snapshots’, represent the tradition as a whole. While the later recordings show that Višnjić’s songs about the First

²¹² *Бановић Страхинја*, in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 194. My translation is based on that in Holton, Milne, and Mihailovich, Vasa D. transl. *Songs of the Serbian People*. Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 1997, p. 112, but I have striven to remain closer to the original, even if the translation itself is slightly clumsier as a result.

²¹³ For more examples of the singers’ individual contributions, see Koljević, *The Epic*, pp. 299-343.

²¹⁴ This is the case with the shorter lyric poetry for example, where it is enough to hear a poem once and to remember it. See Караџић, ‘Предговор’, Vol IV, p. 376.

Serbian Uprising were adopted by other singers and passed on²¹⁵ (thus effectively turning some of the formulopoeic elements into formulaic, increasing their chances of survival), no such thing has occurred with Milija's opening of *Banović Strahinja* (nor other finer points concerning the characterisation) in the later recorded variants of the poem.²¹⁶ The second aspect we mentioned concerning the role played by a historical accident is that the right person (Vuk Karadžić) found himself in the right place and at the right time to record these poems, when the tradition was at its zenith, or rather, at the time when it was undergoing a renaissance. For Alois Schmaus, it is not simply the medium (the length of the poem), but crucially, the conducive socio-historical conditions that are accountable for the higher degree of invention in Christian, rather than Muslim epic. According to Schmaus, the 'epic age' in Bosnian Muslim poems is preserved in memory, 'its fighting élan, its ethos is not being regenerated in everyday skirmishes, as is the case with the Christian song till near the end of the Turkish rule'.²¹⁷ The same difference, but among the Christian songs (of different periods) themselves – Karadžić's on the one hand, and those in the *Erlangen manuscript* on the other – has been noted by Miodrag Maticki, and a similar explanation offered:

The Uprising not only brought the patriotic tone into the folk epic tradition, but caused a new wave of epic heroics, in which people sang differently, even about the events from before the Insurrection. It is only the singers from the Uprising, such as Podrugović and Višnjić, that could elevate the songs about Marko Kraljević from the material with heroic-mythic markers that we find in the *Erlangen manuscript*, to a complex poetry in which that material often undergoes a humorous stripping of pathos.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ See Недић, *Вукови певачи*, p. 61.

²¹⁶ For a detailed account of how Milija's version compares to other recorded variants of *Banović Strahinja*, see Меденица, Радосав. 'Бановић Страхинја у кругу варијаната' in: Недић, Владан, ed. *Народна књижевност*. Београд: Нолит, 1966, pp. 207-224.

²¹⁷ ['Епско доба се чува у сећању, али] његов борбени елан, његов етос се не обнавља свакодневним сукобима, као што је то случај са хришћанском песмом све до пред крај турске владавине.' Шмаус, Алојз. 'Студије о крајинској епизи.' in: Недић, *Народна књижевност*. p. 287.

²¹⁸ 'Устанак није само унео родољубив тон у народну епiku, већ је проузроковао нови талас епске хероике, у којем се другачије певало, чак и о догађајима пре устанка. Тек певачи из

Svetozar Koljević shares a similar view, drawing our attention to how the fact that the personal fates of singers often reflected important aspects of contemporary history, the increased likelihood of ‘bumping’ into a subject never treated before, and also sheer imaginative and moral insights may have forced upon singers the ‘deviation into originality’.²¹⁹ The invention had not occurred because singers ‘cared to be *avant-garde*’.²²⁰

This observation also forces us to put the artistry and originality of particular singers into perspective, to avoid likening it entirely to that present in written texts and pursued for its own sake by modern authors. As Walter Ong rightly points out, inventions are in oral cultures ‘seldom ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors’.²²¹ Hence, when he gives his special rendering of Marko Kraljević, Tešan Podrugović is not pursuing an original portrayal in that it has to differ from those offered by his predecessors (even though effectively the result is precisely such), but showing Marko as he was supposed to have been. This inverted perspective on originality is somewhat reminiscent of Michelangelo’s alleged response to people wondering at his ability to make incredibly lifelike sculptures out of stone: he does not make them, he supposedly said, but rather ‘frees’ what is already there, trapped in the stone. In his portrayal of Marko, Podrugović is likewise ‘freeing’, making visible, what is already there within the tradition. The aesthetic implications of this different perspective on creativity and its relation to the realism of the two literatures will be traced in the next chapter. The purpose of this section, however, was to draw attention to the complexities that

устанка, попут Подруговића и Вишњића, могли су да песме о Марку Краљевићу уздигну од грађе с хероично митским назначењима какву налазимо у Ерлангенском рукопису до сложене поезије у којој та грађа доживљава често и хуморну депатетизацију.’ Матицки, *Поновнице*, р. 27.

²¹⁹ Koljević, *The Epic*, pp. 342-343.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, р. 342.

²²¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, р. 42.

surround the notion of authorship in both the sagas of Icelanders and the epic poems of Serbia: neither are the songs (in the state that I am approaching them) completely oral and authorless, nor do the sagas clearly belong to the written tradition, free from oral and formulaic elements. This makes them comparable.

1.2 The Emergent Realism of the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry

1.2.1 An overview of the problem

a) In the mighty shadow of the nineteenth century

As noted at the beginning of this study, both South Slavic and Old Norse academic communities consider realism in representation as a special feature of their respective literatures, yet for such a firmly established, distinctive quality, this realism comes across as surprisingly elusive and amorphous when it comes to defining it. The explorations of it have in both camps mainly gravitated towards comparisons with nineteenth-century realistic fiction, whether as a consequence of the popularity of the novel in the past two centuries, the positivist quest for the two literatures' historicity, or the more recent trends that treat them as 'vehicles of cultural memory'.²²² So, for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that 'one of the chief characteristics of classical Family Sagas is the illusion of reality which they create'²²³ and Joseph Harris views them as 'a species of historical fiction [...] that anticipates the historical novel'.²²⁴ We have already noted Scholes and Kellogg's

²²² For a similar assessment regarding the sagas see Clunies Ross, Margaret 'Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas' *Scandinavian Studies*. 2002 74 :4, pp. 443 – 54, or Lönnroth, Lars. 'Dreams in the Sagas.' *Scandinavian Studies*. 2002. 74 :4, pp. 455-63.

²²³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*, p.116.

²²⁴ Harris, Joseph. 'Saga as historical novel' in: Lindow, John *et al*, eds. *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986, p. 218.

remark that ‘curtailment of myth and emphasis on mimesis is so nearly complete as to be at times more suggestive of the novel than the epic’,²²⁵ as well as Mary Coote’s observation that ‘the involvement of heroic songs with daily life gives them air of realism and historicity’.²²⁶ Coote further suggests that ‘overtly supernatural phenomena play a minor role in Serbocroatian heroic songs’²²⁷ and Vojislav Đurić also casts the supernatural and the religious in a minor role, as ‘some kind of a decoration’ (‘некакав украс’), emphasising rather the faith in human heroism as the source of ‘the exceptional power of realism in our folk epic’ (‘изузетн[е] снаг[е] реализма наше народне епике’).²²⁸

Alongside this main stream, a corrective counter-current that would not let the mythical and the fantastic in the two literatures be dismissed lightly is also observable. In his lifelong investigations of old Serbian religion and myth, Veselin Čajkanović makes Serbian epics one of his chief sources, and remarks (not without resignation) that, as far as this material is concerned, history has ‘so far, completely erroneously, seized for itself a lion’s share’.²²⁹ Recently, Margaret Clunies Ross has criticised scholarly fascination with realism in the sagas for its resulting ‘tendency not to take adequate notice of the non-realistic dimensions of saga literature’,²³⁰ while Lars Lönnroth reminds us that when the sagas were first assessed as great literature ‘it was not their realism that was praised but rather their mythical horrors and sublime imagination’.²³¹ As a reaction to this state of affairs, Lönnroth notes the following change in saga scholarship:

²²⁵ Scholes and Kellogg, *Narrative*, p. 49.

²²⁶ Coote, ‘Serbocroatian Heroic Songs’, p. 261.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²²⁸ Ђурић, ‘Српскохрватска народна епика’, p. 21.

²²⁹ ‘[историја] која је до сада, сасвим неправилно, присвајала себи лавовски део [...]’.

Čajkanović, *Стара српска религија и митологија*, Vol. V, p. 34.

²³⁰ Clunies Ross, Margaret ‘Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas.’ *Scandinavian Studies*. 2002, 74 (4), p. 445.

²³¹ Lönnroth, Lars. ‘Dreams in the Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies*. 2002. 74 (4), p. 455.

Yet even those who tend to value the realistic mode of the classical family sagas to the exclusion of everything else have had to admit that these apparently sober stories about farming, feuding, and family life of Icelandic settlers indeed contain some mythical and fantastic elements, which seem to undermine the apparent realism of the narrative. In recent years, these elements have attracted the attention of scholars who are unwilling to read sagas primarily or exclusively as works of realism.²³²

What rings deeply true in these scholars' critique is that nineteenth-century realism is an inadequate standard by which to measure the realism of the sagas. In the 1920s Roman Jakobson had already problematised this tendency of the scholarship in general to endow nineteenth-century fiction with the status of an ultimate standard of realism. He says that, despite the fact that artists belonging to different literary periods (classicists, romantics, modernists, etc.) all proclaimed realism as their motto, it is

[...] in the nineteenth century [that] this motto gave rise to an artistic movement. It was primarily the late copiers of that trend who outlined the currently recognized history of art, in particular, the history of literature. Hence, one specific case, one separate artistic movement was identified as the ultimate manifestation of realism in art and was made the standard by which to measure the degree of realism in preceding and succeeding artistic movements.²³³

The consequence of having such a standard in literary criticism is that everything else (in our case Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics) will necessarily be subordinated to it, forced to fit, and thus *a priori* found defective.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 455.

²³³ Jakobson, Roman. 'On Realism in Art' in: Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds. *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971, p. 39. Friedrich Nietzsche offers a similar assessment, although tinged with disapproval: 'All good art has always deluded itself into thinking it is realistic!' (Quoted in Stern, J.P. *On Realism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973, p. 74). See also Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, pp. 230 - 231: 'The novel's great virtue lay in finding a way to combine the tragic concern for the individual with the comic concern for society. That the novelists called this impulse "realism" and felt that they had arrived at the ultimate way of representing "reality" must not deceive us. Theirs was simply a new decorum, more easily achieved in narrative than drama, and itself subject to alteration as new ways of conceiving of the individual and society became available.'

b) *'The everyday' versus 'the fantastic'?*

While I would agree that a more precise qualification of realism in the sagas and Serbian epics is needed, I find myself equally dissatisfied when the solutions are sought in a kind of poetic justice, the transferral of scholarly interest from what they deem 'realistic' to 'non-realistic dimensions of the saga literature' since this reversal itself entirely rests on the premise that 'realistic' needs to be the nineteenth-century kind of realistic.²³⁴ It is only under this premise that the 'mythical and fantastic elements' are directly juxtaposed to, and found to undermine the 'sober stories about farming' or 'daily life'. Once the 'mythic and fantastic elements' are brought under closer scrutiny, however, and compared to the 'mythic and fantastic elements' in *Beowulf*, *Nibelungenlied*, or, indeed, *fornaldarsögur*, this juxtaposition becomes void, since, in the way these elements are represented, they still have much more in common with the 'sober stories about farming'. It immediately becomes apparent that, when it comes to the quality of 'sublime imagination' in the strict terms of 'mythical horror' *Beowulf*, *Nibelungenlied*, and *fornaldarsögur* surpass the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics by far. To see this one only need juxtapose the blind fury, the talons, the claws and fiendish dexterity that Grendel's mother unleashes at *Beowulf*, with the panic and impotence of *vila* (fairy) Ravijojla as she flees helter-skelter in front of an enraged Marko Kraljević whose blood-brother Miloš she shot with an arrow. The unfathomable malevolence of Grendel and his mother that radiates even from their dead bodies, is hardly to be matched by the captured and thrashed Ravijojla compelled to heal Miloš's wounds and left to complain to her fellow fairies more in a manner of a battered wife who 'overstepped her boundaries', than the free, mischievous and self-willed mountain sprite who has been grievously

²³⁴ Of course, 'the nineteenth century kind of realism' is itself a construct assuming a degree of homogeneity between works as different as those of Dickens, Balzac and Tolstoy.

offended. Similarly, compared to the sheer monstrosity, sexual aggressiveness and predatory nature of the giantesses in *fornaldarsögur*, the two daughters of the giant Þórir with whom Grettir frolics about in the meadows hidden among the glaciers more resemble the meek (if slightly saucy) shepherdesses of pastoral idyll.

c) Fantastic everyday and the verisimilitude of the supernatural

The surprising twist, the exciting novelty that appears in the sagas and Serbian epics is that what we, circumscribed by our own time, deem ‘the fantastic’ (or ‘the marvellous’ as Todorov would call it) is related ‘with the same minuteness of detail’,²³⁵ in the same ‘realistic’ vein, as what we identify as ‘the everyday’, and what we so easily relate to the nineteenth-century kind of real. The same can be detected in Serbian epics, and Čajkanović often chides Serbian singers for what he sees as their constant rationalisation of the fantastic, their ‘decadence’ – a degradation of myth.²³⁶ Just like the scenes of settlement, farming and outlawry, or the two literatures’ characters, the accounts of dreams, the encounters with fantastic beings, these beings themselves in the sagas and Serbian epics are complex, immersed in the untidy, unpolished, the contradictory that are, as Erich Auerbach maintains, so important to our sense of authenticity. In his seminal work on the representation of reality in western literature, *Mimesis*, Auerbach draws a distinction between ‘the historical’ (or realistic) and ‘the legendary’ (or non-realistic). The legendary, he says,

[...] runs far too smoothly. All cross-currents, all friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, everything unresolved, truncated, and uncertain, which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors has disappeared.²³⁷

²³⁵ Craigie, W.A. *The Icelandic Sagas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913, p. vi.

²³⁶ Čajkanović, *O Vrhovnom bogu u staroj srpskoj religiji*. Београд: СКЗ, БИГЗ, Просвета, Партеон, 1994, Vol. III, p. 258; see also *Стара српска религија и митологија*, Vol. V, p. 36.

²³⁷ Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 19.

It is important to emphasise that the ‘historical’ and the ‘legendary’ are treated here as modes of narration, not generic markers, and that legends and fantasies can be (and in the *Íslendingasögur* and Serbian epics they often are) treated in the ‘historical’ mode, and vice versa, works intended as histories can be (and parts of the twelfth-century *Landnámabók* and the nineteenth-century accounts of the First Serbian Uprising often are) treated in the ‘legendary’ mode. While considering dreams in the sagas Lars Lönnroth himself finds that they are ‘extraordinarily complex and ambiguous’²³⁸ in comparison to those in the *Edda* or the *fornaldarsögur*, and notes that only in the *Íslendingasögur* are dreams related in skaldic verses. Since they are frequently exploited for their authenticating power in the sagas²³⁹ as well as Icelandic medieval historiography²⁴⁰ skaldic verses seem to corroborate the prophetic nature of a dream: whatever is related in them is bound to come to pass. John Lindow speaks of ‘the fantastic’ in the *Íslendingasögur* in terms of ‘the verisimilitude of supernatural experience in saga literature’²⁴¹ and ‘the empirical supernatural’²⁴² as opposed to the *fornaldarsögur* and romances where ‘the marvellous seems taken for granted and the supernatural attaches rather to it than to reality’.²⁴³ In other words, in the way they are represented, the supernatural and the fantastic in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems do not jeopardise, but rather complement the two literatures’ realism.

Having said this, it is important to note that the ‘historical’ mode is here simply the one that relates more closely to the two literatures in focus, not the

²³⁸ Lönnroth, ‘Dreams in the Sagas’, p. 456.

²³⁹ See for example: Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues*, p. 49.

²⁴⁰ See for example: Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. Lee M. Hollander, transl. Austin, Texas: Texas University Press, 1995, p. 5.

²⁴¹ Lindow, John. ‘*Þorsteins þáttur skelks* and the Verisimilitude of Supernatural Experience in Saga Literature.’ in: Lindow, John *et al.*, eds. *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986, p. 264.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

preferred one in either epistemic or aesthetic sense. In his 1960s classic, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth successfully dispenses with any specific ‘rules’ that are supposed to make up good literature:

There is a pleasure in seeing someone whom we like triumph over difficulties, and there is a pleasure in recognising that life is so complex that no one ever triumphs unambiguously. [...] There is a pleasure from learning the simple truth, and there is a pleasure from learning that truth is not simple. Both are legitimate sources of literary effect [...].²⁴⁴

Indeed there is a pleasure in the nobility of Beowulf and Siegfried, their uncompromising stamina, dignity and their heroic determinism, and there is an equal pleasure in the fallibility and unpredictability of Marko Kraljević and Grettir the Strong, in the balancing out of their prodigal strength and the outbursts of violence with their comical lightness of being as well as the moments of gentle compassion. There is a truth in Bonnie Tyler’s outcry: ‘I need a hero!’, and in Tina Turner’s disenchantment: ‘We don’t need *another* hero’. I can think of no reason for choosing between the two.

It should also be noted that nineteenth-century realism is an inadequate *standard* by which to measure the realism in the sagas, not that there are no affinities between the two. In chapter three of this study we will discuss an array of sophisticated authenticating devices regularly used by the saga men and the guslars in their self-conscious striving towards objectivity in narration, an aspiration that is, one can easily concede, comparable with that present in nineteenth-century realistic fiction. This does not, however, exhaust the representational complexity of our two literatures. As Torfi Tulinius points out in the case of the sagas:

²⁴⁴ Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961, pp. 135-136.

The interest of the *Íslendingasögur* lies not only in the illusion of reality they convey. It also lies in their complexity, which is the complexity of human existence [...].²⁴⁵

The complexity of the sagas (and Serbian epics), ‘which is the complexity of human existence’ is precisely the key to their realism, I would argue, and the ‘illusion of reality’ or verisimilitude that can be found in them, might well only be its by-product.

1.1.2 Realism of complexity and emergence

a) Representational limitations

Pursuing this connection between complexity and reality seems particularly fecund, not least because the discourse on realism in the sagas and Serbian epics tends to revolve around words such as ambiguity, intricacy and, above all, complexity. More importantly, perhaps, this connection offers an alternative route to discussing realism in terms of an ideal representation of reality. Jakobson’s observation – that artists of nearly all periods proclaimed realism as their motto – indicates that whatever is conceived of as realistic tends to change through the ages and further varies from one artist/individual to another. All these ‘realisms’ hardly constitute ultimate representations of reality (even if their creators intended them as such), simply different kinds: anatomic realism of Leonardo; realism of atmospheric conditions in Monet; of overlapping perspectives in Picasso; realism of sweat, dirt and sickness in Zola; of existential futility, nostalgia and free roaming of consciousness in Woolf; kitchen-sink, social, photographic, magic, dirty realisms... With certain aspects of reality being emphasised in one, and others (‘the neglected ones’) in another

²⁴⁵ Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 294.

period/artist, the idea of a definitive realistic representation becomes void, if not ludicrous: one cannot possibly fit all aspects of reality in a piece of art (even if one was up to such a monstrously tedious task); some sort of selection always takes place. The only ultimately adequate representation of reality would be reality itself, but then, of course, such a thing would not constitute a representation in the first place. As Renford Bambrough observes regarding the relationship between geographical features and their representation on maps:

The ideal limiting case of a reproduction is reduplication, and a duplicate is too true to be useful. Anything that falls short of the ideal limit of reduplication is too useful to be altogether true. And this goes not only for maps, but also descriptions, pictures, portraits and theories [...].²⁴⁶

Besides, at least since Einstein's theory of relativity, it has widely been accepted that human situatedness within, renders the 'reality itself' forever out of bounds; an overall perspective on it is forever denied. In our universe there can be no such thing as a neutral observer, as its physics disallows the object of observation to remain unchanged by the act/process of observation. Structuralists and Poststructuralists have further pointed out that the fact that our perception is inextricably tied to language (as well as other conventions of our specific cultural environments) forbids any unmediated access to reality: reality can only ever be what we make it.

b) Reading agency and intention in natural world: complexity vs. purpose

But if we fundamentally lack an objective perspective on reality, we are nevertheless well equipped with various intuitions about it (after all, we are quite successfully swimming in it), and the one implicit in the above discussion is that reality is complex – too complex, in fact, to be adequately represented. There seems to be a

²⁴⁶ Bambrough, Renford in: Stern, *On Realism*, p. 67.

direct connection between what is perceived as real, natural, and complexity. We expect Nature always to be a step ahead, that it is always a little bit more than anyone should be able to handle, and as any gardener struggling with weeds (those harbingers of entropy and chaos) knows – that it is ‘messier’ than a human would have made it. This expectation accounts for the fact that we rarely experience difficulty in distinguishing between a wild meadow and a park, a natural and an artificial lake, a branch bifurcating sideways and a wooden cross. Flowers in a meadow will hardly be found arranged in tidy rows – white tulips in one, red in another, yellow in the third. The kind of irregular edge that encircles natural lakes cannot be made by bulldozers, and the ‘branch crucifix’ will lack the right angles. We rely on efficiency and purposefulness, shrewd economising, patterning, straight lines, regular shapes and smooth edges to betray man-made objects. This ability to determine if the environment has been tampered with and to detect agency (human, animal, or divine²⁴⁷) is inextricably linked to our survival as a species. Our success as predators and our success at evading predation depended on our ability to read the environment and also make it less readable to predators or competitors; it depended on our ability to uncover the tracks of the prey and to disguise our own.

The fact that we find it relatively easy to make decisions about what is ‘natural’ and what is man-made does not in the least mean that we are always right, not even often right – merely that we are right often *enough* and in proportion to our

²⁴⁷ If one walked through a desert and came across a black cube-shaped stone, one would be much inclined to abduct (infer) agency from its regular shape and disharmonious presence within the otherwise homogenous landscape. Provided that there are no ways of assigning this agency to humans, provided one knows nothing of meteorite showers and little miracles that, given enough time, weather and sand can perform, one would be likely to postulate divine agency much sooner than s/he would allow for the possibility of the stone somehow appearing in the middle of a desert all by itself. And one would do absolutely the same if s/he had a look at the sky one rainy day and discovered in amazement that it has been pierced by a perfect seven-fold shining arc, each of the seven folds tinted with a beautiful bright colour. One might then as well call the latter a rainbow, take the former (‘Al-hajar Al-aswad’) to Mecca, and read both as signs of God’s enduring love, his covenants with human race. Who else can send such extraordinary, yet clear, unambiguous messages?

life expectancy of several decades. The temporal scale of a human lifetime is, Richard Dawkins argues, an important parameter when it comes to our ability to assess the likelihood of things and so calculate risks that we are about to take. He suggests that some aliens with the life expectancy of a million centuries would probably find crossing a street too dangerous since the odds of their being run over would be significantly higher than ours; a perfect bridge hand every so often would hardly be something worth writing home about, he maintains, but even such creatures would ‘blench if a marble statue waves at them, for you have to live dealings of years longer than even they do to see a miracle of this magnitude’.²⁴⁸ Within the parameters of human *modus (mundus?) operandi*, natural selection has equipped us to calculate risks and probabilities, to develop an intuition about what counts as a normal, everyday occurrence, and what constitutes an oddity. In other words, it has equipped us to read/ ‘abduct’²⁴⁹ intentionality from our environment. Whether the intention we suppose we read was *really* intended is something that forever stays out of reach: all we have to go by is the *impression* of intentionality.

c) *Reading agency and intention in fictional worlds: mediation as the potential for oppression*

The same intuitions apply when it comes to the detection of agency and the abduction of intentionality in fictional worlds. In order to imbue their works with the complex texture of reality so that these resemble wild meadows rather than what they really are – cultivated gardens, writers have over time developed a number of strategies: for example, one of the nineteenth-century novelists’ favourites was

²⁴⁸ Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 162.

²⁴⁹ The term relates to Piercian notion of abduction, the kind of reasoning that Charles Pierce describes in his ‘Prolegomena of an Apology to Pragmatism’ as a ‘process of thought capable of producing no conclusion more definite than a conjecture’. (Bergman, Mats and Sami Paavola, eds. (2001) *The Commens Dictionary of Pierce’s Terms. Pierce’s Terminology in His Own Words*. [online] Available at: <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens.dictionary.html> [21/01/2005].)

introducing various subplots and blind allies, ‘loose ends and contradictions’, that Auerbach noted, or, to go with our meadow-garden metaphor – they realised they would have to sprinkle some weeds, as well as flowers in order to disguise the purposeful nature of their actions. Hence Tolstoy’s accidental meetings between characters that will have no bearing whatsoever on the development of the plot, Balzac’s and Dickens’s ‘bric à brac’ of the age’,²⁵⁰ Flaubert’s *baromètre* whose existence, as Roland Barthes famously argues, hardly has any other function within *A Simple Heart* than to create ‘l’effet de réel’ [‘the effect of the real’].²⁵¹ As the photographer Jean-Luc Lioult explains: ‘The presence of elements of little significance that do not obey the laws of representative efficiency help construct a feeling that “it can’t be fake”’.²⁵² Trying not to have a purpose (or hiding it) is also a purpose, of course, and like any other investment (e.g. athletes’ strenuous training), this one too is costly and can therefore (like athletes’ muscles) hardly go unnoticed. Experiencing it over and over, the reader will eventually posit an intention behind the ‘weeds’ and unmask the ploy.

But the reader’s upper hand in these ‘arms-races’ with authors is only temporary, and just as the increase in the speed of antelopes drives the increase in the speed of cheetahs (and vice versa), so does the reader’s ability to unmask one sort of ploy drive the writer to come up with new, ever fresher ploys. So, for example, Postmodern writers give up on playing God and the paradoxical endeavour to create wild meadows. A Postmodern writer treats the artifice of art as a given – the realism on offer is that of exposure of the creative process rather than of concealment and illusion. Instead of hiding them, the writer – the master puppeteer – shows the reader

²⁵⁰ Stern, *On Realism*, p. 5.

²⁵¹ Barthes, Roland. ‘The Reality Effect’ in: *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 141-148.

²⁵² Lioult, Jan-Luc. (2005) ‘Framing the Unexpected.’ *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. [online], 47. Available at: www.ejumpcut.org [15 March 2005].

the strings, inviting him/her to pull them, become an accomplice in the creative act. For example, in Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* one is under no obligation to read the chapters chronologically but can do it playfully, skipping over whole chapters in various hopscotch sequences, and in Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, one can read in any order, piecing together the narrative by freely following the entries (as one does in dictionaries) across the novel's three parts. In other words, we (readers) are given freedom to create our own narratives. Hands-on in the creative process, there is no danger of having a world pulled over our eyes, there is no space left to doubt one's own creation: it is as real as real gets.

Or is it? Apparently, the more 'freedom' the reader is supposed to enjoy, the more s/he gets swamped with various 'Tables of Instructions', or narrative navigational maps. The freedom of choice offered in our two examples is still an offer: the hand offering it is always above the hand accepting it.²⁵³ The reader can exercise his/her freedom by choosing which levers to pull; the architecture of the puppet show box, however, is set, with leavers and strings already placed, pre-empting all the reader's moves, designing the space where all possible lines of emplotment can take place. Although an active perpetrator, as a helper and a potential subject (victim?) to allurements and coercion, an accomplice in creative and criminal acts alike is someone held less accountable: it is the criminal/creative mastermind that usually gets the heavy sentence (if caught) and all the fame and infamy too. To be sure, an accomplice-reader is more of an agent in the creative act than a mere spectator, but freedom to act is only one kind of freedom to be had: freedom of the reader-spectator consists precisely in staying aloof, not committing, not being implicated, demanding to be entertained.

²⁵³ This is a paraphrase of the African proverb: 'The hand that gives is always above the hand that receives.' Another variant of it is: 'The hand that gives is happier than the hand that receives.'

A God-wannabe or a master puppeteer, a kind host, or a treacherous rogue, a despot or a democrat, withdrawn or exposed, it is this function as the ultimate mediator of the fictional world that makes the abducted author²⁵⁴ suspect: his power to mediate is also the power to control and so the power to oppress, regardless of whether the latter is overtly exercised or not.

d) Overridden intentions and scrambled mediation: emergent realism

But what happens with mediation in traditional texts? Narrative strategies and ploys of various kinds are found in abundance in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry too, yet their realism is, as W.P. Ker also notes for Homer and Shakespeare, ‘different from the premeditated and self-assertive realism of the authors who take viciously to common life by way of protest against the romantic extreme’.²⁵⁵ ‘L’effet de réel’ is not achieved through such things as Flaubert’s *baromètre*²⁵⁶ or Tolstoy’s trivial meetings placed nonchalantly, ‘accidentally on purpose’ in hot pursuit of the effect we call verisimilitude. It is not a Modernist or a Postmodernist protest against the ‘realist extreme’ of hidden but all the same pervasive/oppressive authority either. The point is, I will argue in the chapters to follow, that it is not a *protest* or *pursuit*, or any such clearly readable trajectory that will point to authorial agency, alert the reader/listener that the world s/he is entering is being mediated. The two literatures’ realism, as suggested at the outset of our discussion of complexity, goes beyond the intricacy of their *representations*. As the reader will recall Torfi Tulinius’s observation, the complexity of the sagas (and Serbian epics, I added) is ‘the

²⁵⁴ ‘Abducted author’ stands here instead of Booth’s *implied author* (see: Booth, *Rhetoric*, especially pp. 70-76) to emphasise the mechanism that (‘illegally’) constructs such a figure, rather than assume it as some positive presence *within* the text.

²⁵⁵ Ker, *Epic and Romance*, pp. 16-17.

²⁵⁶ See Prendergast, Christopher. *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.70.

complexity of human existence'. In other words, it is complexity that defies purpose, the kind we find in Nature. But is this possible? Haven't we also said, just a moment ago, that *creating* wild meadows is a paradox?

Positive answers to both questions only seem contradictory. Although undoubtedly cultivated, purpose-ridden human products, traditional narratives such as the sagas and Serbian epics nevertheless have something very much in common with things of Nature: both are subject to evolutionary processes; except, of course, that, unlike living creatures, traditional texts are shaped not by natural, but aesthetic²⁵⁷ selection. The 'loose ends' and contradictions, crosscurrents and friction which (as we have seen a while ago) Auerbach identifies as crucial for the believability of an account²⁵⁸ to large extent arise from the dynamics of the two literatures' production in their oral (and, in the case of the sagas, also their manuscript) stages, both of these stages involving networks of creators and a prolonged period of creation. In these complex processes, intentions need not be purposefully hidden, they get subverted and scrambled anyway; or, to go with our garden-meadow metaphor, they get overgrown with 'weeds' that are not strategically placed, contrived, but are products of time, changing perspectives, ever shifting attitudes towards the past events and characters, ever adapting to the present needs of a community. In traditional narratives these attitudes accrete and accumulate; tradition, like evolution, wastes nothing: catastrophes and erasures are extremely rare – adaptations and transformations much more common.

So, for example, Marko the ruthless outlaw of the sixteenth-century *bugarštice* and Marko the fearless border raider of the eighteenth-century *Erlangen manuscript* also have the features of Marko the noble feudal lord and Marko the yoked Turkish

²⁵⁷ By *aesthetic*, I do not suppose to emphasise Horace's *dulce* over his *utile*, or to divorce the social from the literary: it is assumed that whatever is considered beautiful by a community is also useful.

²⁵⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 19.

vassal. Marko from Karadžić's collections inherits all these traits (in solutions and proportions peculiar to different singers, but present nevertheless) and brings the contradictions of his own age too: like Serbian rebels of the nineteenth century whose First Uprising (1804) started as a revolt against the local oppressors of whose ruthless behaviour even the Sultan disapproved, only to grow into an outright war for independence, Marko too treads the precarious ground between a loyal subject and the ultimate freedom-fighter. We do not have such series of 'synchronic snapshots of a diachronic process'²⁵⁹ tradition in the sagas, but the accreted attitudes that cross and overlap, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes at odds with one another, are nevertheless still visible. For example, in *Egils saga*, emigrating to Iceland is represented as a noble move of brave freedom-loving people who would not stand for the tyranny of king Haraldr; except, of course, that some other brave freedom-loving people decided to fight him and nobly perish instead; and except that Haraldr the tyrant is also a great unifier of Norway, a generous ruler and the source of rapid social advancement for yet another brave lot of noble, freedom-loving people.

The singer/saga author, however, does not set off to create Marko/ Haraldr as a complex character (with good and bad characteristics alike); rather, he *ends up* with him as such. For the epic singer Marko is as fully-fledged a hero as heroes get, and there is no inkling in the saga author that colonising Iceland and setting up a free state rather than enduring (or being killed by) Haraldr was anything other than a noble (if prudent too!) venture. At the same time, there is no changing the fact that Marko is a Turkish vassal and that, for all his might and fierceness, he and his people are still in bondage. And equally, there is no changing the fact that the free Icelandic commonwealth is destroying (has destroyed) itself by endless feuding in front of the

²⁵⁹ Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, p. 4. (See note 179 above.)

saga author's very eyes. There is no quarrelling with the fact that in such situations 'a firm hand' (like Haraldr's?) might at least bring some temporary stability. The complex picture of the past that one comes across in the two literatures does not merely amount to willed representational effects. Rather, the complexity and ambiguity ensue out of the dynamics in which these juxtaposed (rather than causally related or harmonised) attitudes to the past engage, as well as the multiple (contradictory as well as complementary) functions that the characters are required to perform. In other words, the realism of the two literatures is not so much an attempt to create complex representation, it *emerges* out of the non-linear dynamic inherent in their media.

Emergent phenomena, or what is well known to the students of the humanities in the guise of the whole being 'more than the sum of its parts', have in the late twentieth century become subject to intense study and experimentation in the natural sciences, most notably in the area of artificial intelligence, studies of neural networks, evolutionary computation, etc., and are described thus:

[E]mergent phenomena occur when a system composed of many individual elements exhibits collective behaviour that seems not to be built into the individuals in any obvious or explicit manner. For instance, the human brain comprises innumerable nerve cells, yet a nerve cell seems not to possess the tiniest smidgen of intelligence.²⁶⁰

The description above closely corresponds to the way the realism of the two literatures comes about. This is not to suggest that the saga author/epic singer's individuality, his creativity, does not matter (as we shall see in good time, in the evolution of living things and texts alike, individuality is essential if any change at all is ever to take place), but rather that, beyond any particular/local contribution of a

²⁶⁰ Stewart, Ian. *Life's Other Secret: The New Mathematics of the Living World*. London: Penguin, 1998, p. 160.

talented individual there is a creativity taking place on a whole different level – that of the creative evolutionary process itself. Whatever the bias of the particular contributor to the evolution of a traditional narrative,²⁶¹ the already inherited layers of attitudes and perspectives (and those that will come after) destabilise it, condition it, resist the harmonisation that would invite the reader to abduct agency and become aware of the text being mediated.

So, rather than approaching the realism of the sagas and Serbian epics purely in terms of the verisimilitude with which it is commonly associated, in the next chapter I will try to show that it is an emergent feature (*emergent realism*) of the facilitating non-linear dynamics of the sagas'/ Serbian epics' production (*the distributed author*). The way this dynamics plays itself out to form a complex picture of the past and characters in the sagas/Serbian epics, as well as the dynamics that further support the diffusion of a single mediating voice in the two literatures – generic (between epic/historiography, tragic/comic modes), and ideological (between aristocratic/democratic ethos, 'winner'/'loser' attitudes²⁶²) will be examined more closely in chapters three and four.

²⁶¹ Even if it is the pursuit of 'the reality effect'.

²⁶² For the distinction between the 'winner' and the 'loser' epics see: Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

II

The *Distributed Author* of the Sagas of Icelanders' and Serbian Epics' *Emergent Realism*

2.1 *Who Is Speaking in Traditional Texts?*

a) Of story-lovers and their narrative allegiances

In the opening chapter of his *Matter of the North*, Torfi Tulinius tells a charming story about an Icelandic farmer from the beginning of the twentieth century who was accustomed to having the saga of Grettir the Strong read to him once a year. He would listen to it quietly, without reaction,

except at two or three moments in the story when he would exclaim: “Þetta hefðir þú betur látið ógert Grettir minn, þá værir þú enn á lífi!” which means, “you would have been better off not doing that, my dear Grettir – then you would still be alive!”¹

A famous Bosnian writer, Branko Ćopić, relates a similar anecdote from his childhood in the late 1920s and 30s about an ancient yet boisterous school warden (and an ex-member of the last of the outlaw bands that regularly engaged in skirmishes with the Turks), Đurađ Karabardaković. Once a year on All Souls' Day Đurađ would buy the biggest candle available, go to a church and light it for the soul of Marko Kraljević. Seeing him upset, the concerned villagers would approach and ask him what the matter was.

– Marko died! – says Đurađ crying.
– Marko who? – people ask again.
– What do you mean, who? Marko Kraljević of course, my dear Marko – complains the old man. – Alas me, such a hero he was!

[– Умро Марко! – плачући вели Ђурађ.
– Ама који Марко? – опет ће људи.

¹ Torfi H Tulinius. *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in 13th-century Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press, 2002, p. 31.

– Како који? Па Краљевић Марко, мој драги Марко – жали се старац. Куку мени за онаким јунаком!]²

Durađ would then go to a local tavern to drink for the peace and rest of Marko's departed soul and soon after have the village sexton read him of his hero's feats, issuing the following warning: 'Mind well how you read, Gliša. Don't let Marko end up in a dungeon by any chance, or you'll see my cornel staff here at work.' [– Глишо, пази добро како читаш. Немој случајно да ти Марко допадне тамнице, јер ће онда радити овај мој штап дреновац.]³

These two very different characters – a quiet, composed farmer and a spirited old outlaw – nevertheless show a similar passion for their favourite heroes and a degree of involvement that blurs the boundaries between fictional and corporeal worlds. Indeed, Torfi Tulinius uses his anecdote precisely to illustrate that 'to read a story, or hear it read is to live it'.⁴

The notion is familiar enough – from the sweet anxiety at whether (or more often, how) 'Jack shall have his Jill' by the end of a romance; over sharing in the trials and tribulations of a 'plain Jane', or an Eugène de Rastignac bent on conquering the tired old world (a haunted Mr. Rochester/ a decadent Paris) with their youthful energies; to desperately clinging to the redeeming qualities of likable rogues and wishing thousands of violent deaths upon the proven and incorrigible villains. That, of course, goes on smoothly only by invitation; otherwise, we are likely to find ourselves being barred from the characters, reminded of their separate, fiction-bound existence, and so forced into a cool evaluative distance. But even as invited partakers in the fates of our heroes, we will hardly go and light a candle for the soul of Père Goriot, or shout warnings at Jane Eyre ('There's a mad woman in the attic, and it isn't Grace Pool!'),

² Ћопић, Бранко. *Башта сљезове боје/ Глава у кланцу ноге на вранцу*. Београд: Просвета, 1975. р. 230.

³ Ћопић, *Глава*, р. 230.

⁴ Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, р. 31.

although we might shed an odd tear at the sight of Jack prostrated over a hospital bed, clutching the knees of the dead Jill.⁵ This is not simply down to our being more sophisticated readers than the Icelandic farmer or Ðurað (the two are hardly readers as such: the latter is illiterate, and, whether literate or not, the former is being read to), but to the fact that, unlike their allegiance to Grettir and Marko, ours to Jane or Eugène is overridden by (subjected to) another– the allegiance to the one issuing the invitations into (or, as it sometimes happens, denying an unrestricted access to) the lives of characters: the abducted author. This allegiance with the projected authorial figure (often, but not always, through the most common of authorial effigies – the narrator) provides us with a privileged (‘above’) perspective in respect to the characters, puts us always a step ahead of them and so equips us with anything potentially worth shouting at them about. While this perspective makes us care about what happens to the characters, it at the same time creates enough distance between us, the distance that usually prevents us from *actually* shouting out warnings and instructions at our heroes. The sense of familiarity the Icelandic farmer had with Grettir the Strong and the Bosnian school-warden with Marko Kraljević is, on the other hand, more immediate, primary; the closeness to the characters does not come as a result of (or, at the price of) mediation by an author figure. Then again, unlike Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Balzac’s *Père Goriot*, stories of Marko and Grettir’s adventures come before their tellers – in other words, they are different kinds of narratives, traditional narratives.

⁵ Indeed, some of us, readers (or more often, viewers), occasionally take things further. So, for example, we hear of some American teenagers who went on killing sprees after they saw the film *The Matrix*. In these cases, however, the complete immersion in a film/book character seems likelier to be a symptom rather than the cause of violent behaviour.

b) Of stories that 'tell themselves'

Even though they do not necessarily feel compelled to address Grettir directly, or light a candle for Marko's soul, critics still share some common ground with our farmer and Þurað in recognising the primacy of the reader's /listener's relationship with the characters in traditional narratives, and acknowledge that somehow mediation by an authorial figure seems circumvented in these texts. So for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that in *Íslendingasögur* 'it is as if the reader or listener witnesses the events himself, and as if there is no author, no one between these events and the reader',⁶ and Robert Kellogg expresses a similar sentiment:

The heroic ego of the high artist, with whom we collaborate as readers, is replaced in traditional art by the heroic egos of characters alone. Their fates, their meaning are no less significant to us than those of the characters in high art. *But they are beyond our control, or that of any human agent, in a truly autonomous world of story that suffers no mediation between its relentless energies and our "retirement" as audience.*⁷

This intuition is, while voiced, still largely left unexplored, even bracketed off by the very scholars voicing it. Hence Einar Ól. Sveinsson hastens to add to the above observation that the perceived lack of mediation is in fact a calculated effect of the genius author, who 'takes pains to say neither too much nor too little',⁸ while (sadly but understandably, considering the scope and general direction of his article) Kellogg does not engage any further with the possible causes nor with the aesthetic implications of the immediacy with which characters and events emerge from traditional narratives. This is perhaps not so surprising when taken into account that counter to the above intuition runs the critics' distinctly literary training, reminding

⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1958, p. 116.

⁷ Kellogg, Robert. 'Varieties of Tradition in Medieval Narrative' in: Bekker-Nielsen, Hans *et al.*, eds. *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium* Odense: Odense University Press, 1979, p. 127, my emphasis.

⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*, p. 116.

them that ‘since the text is a spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it’.⁹ The assumption is very common indeed. In his article, ‘Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*’,¹⁰ Anthony C. Spearing quotes similar views from narratologists on both sides of the Atlantic: from Scholes and Kellogg, who state that “‘By definition, narrative art requires a story and a storyteller’”,¹¹ and from Roland Barthes who asserts that “‘there can be no narrative without a narrator’”.¹²

Nowadays, however, scholars working with traditional texts (oral and oral-derived) as well as medieval texts that were most commonly written with a view to being orally performed are beginning to acknowledge more and more the poverty of the available narratological vocabulary, the inability of the existing interpretative tools (best suited to post-Gutenbergian texts) to support the interpretation that would take the oral aspect of traditional texts into account. In the above article, as well as his recent lecture, ‘The Medieval Textual I’,¹³ Spearing has voiced a profound dissatisfaction with the category of the narrator when it comes to the question of who is speaking in medieval texts. The narrator, he argues, is a necessary construct of a text well embedded in literary tradition (printed text), a figure created to fulfil the function that is in oral situations obviated by the presence of a corporeal person relating the story – someone you can threaten with a bloody nose if he gets things wrong (as we have seen *Đurađ* do, happily oblivious to/ignoring the story’s transposition from the medium in which it existed fluid and malleable, to another

⁹ Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge, 1983, p. 3.

¹⁰ Spearing, Anthony C. ‘Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*.’ *New Literary History*, 2001, 32, (3), 715-746.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 728.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 728.

¹³ Delivered on 7th May, 2005 at the 40th Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo. Spearing has also announced a forthcoming book on subjectivity in medieval texts later in 2005.

where it was captured, made unalterable¹⁴). Medieval texts, Spearing further suggests, have no narrators – the story is ‘telling itself’:

[...] in the medieval period – an age of stories and of that storytelling which Chaucer represents in the *Canterbury Tales* – the normal assumption seems to have been not that every story expresses an individual human consciousness, but that stories have a kind of autonomous existence in the realm of their own. In medieval culture stories are generally imagined as without origin, and the role of the poet can be somewhat like that of the merchant from whom we are told that the Man of Law learned his story [...] – not a producer but a trafficker in products that always already exist.¹⁵

Spearing’s immediate concern are Chaucerian texts, but the same applies to the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics; even more so, one could argue, considering that they come from traditions where denial of authorship plays a major part in the creative process, while with Chaucer such practice slowly wanes.¹⁶ In *The House of Fame*, for example, the inherited impulse towards self-effacement before the ultimate authority of the ‘grete clerke’ (rarely left so anonymously labelled, but rather invoked by their proper names: Virgil, Ovid, Dante) is concurrent with the impulse towards self-assertion. So, despite his apparent humility while telling the well-known story of Aeneas’s betrayal of Dido, Chaucer’s dreamer (‘coincidentally’ a chubby

¹⁴ In fact, this is what the literate Gliša has to do as well in order to get out of the sticky situation. Just as Musa the Highwayman throws Marko on his back in the poem Gliša is reading, seating himself upon our hero’s chest, Đurađ jumps at Gliša, casting himself in the role of Marko’s rescuer and addressing the sexton (in whom he can now only see Musa) the formulaic lines typical for such a character: ‘Wait a little, Musa the Highwayman,/ here is something you did not expect,/ Marko has a good sworn brother,/ the sworn brother Karabardak Đurađ!’ [‘Стани мало, Муса Кесеџија,/ ево теби од шта се не надаш,/ има Марко добра побратима,/ побратима Карабардак Ђурђа!’] His book flung out of reach, Gliša has to improvise and so addresses Đurađ with a likewise formulaic entreaty typical of the captives, or defeated enemies, a gesture that now offers a chance to the hero to show his nobility just as he had shown his prowess: ‘By God brother, Karabardak Đurađ,/ spare my life in this combat,/ I will rescue Marko for you/ and I’ll give you three loads of treasure!’ [‘Богом брате Карабардак Ђурђу,/ опрости ми живот на мегдану,/ ја ћу теби избавити Марка/ и даћу ти три товара блага!’] (Ћопић, *Глава*, pp. 230-231.) Even as Ћопић’s exaggeration aimed at the comic effect, the scene is still illustrative of different attitudes towards (and expectations from) traditional narratives.

¹⁵ Spearing, ‘Narrative Voice’, p. 728.

¹⁶ Spearing is well aware of this, but stresses that Chaucer’s interest in the connection between the stories and their tellers were ‘early, exploratory stages of the development that he was only beginning’ and cautions fellow medievalists against making an assumption that ‘Chaucer in the late fourteenth century could leap immediately into the world of the dramatic monologue (or would have wished to do so) [...]’. *Ibid.*, p. 729.

fellow called Geoffrey) is anxious to distinguish himself from other authors that have told it before him, a gesture quite alien to oral poets and traditional storytellers. As Dido utters her words of 'grete peyne' the dreamer says that he has truly heard them in his dream, strongly asserting his own authority over them: 'non other auctour alegge I'.¹⁷ Furthermore, after Dido's lamentation in which the major theme is infamy that her affair with Aeneas will bring (one of the aspects of fame explored in Chaucer's poem), the dreamer recommends that whoever wants to know more of the manner in which she died and what she had said on the occasion can: 'Rede Virgile in Eneydos/ Or the Epistle of Ovyde'.¹⁸ Even if his audience was still largely illiterate, Chaucer is here addressing those who *can* 'rede', favouring the emerging literate culture over the existing oral one. In the house of Fame, it is Orpheus, the representative of the cultured Greece and Rome that is put at the pinnacle of his art, while the famous Gaelic bard and representative of oral culture, Bret Glascurion, is mentioned only after Orion, Eacides Chiron, 'and other harpers many oon',¹⁹ as occupying the humble place beside the greatest of poets and musicians. An even lowlier place is occupied by an anonymous mass of harpers, gaping upwards towards the more accomplished artists, trying to 'countrefete hem as an ape'.²⁰ Chaucer's awareness of his text as a distinct self-contained entity in respect to other such entities, the referral of the reader to related texts, the derogatory attitude to 'aping' other people's art (the concept ultimately dependent on placing value on originality and assigning an ownership to a text), indicate the slow but sure move towards what

¹⁷ Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The House of Fame*. Nicholas R. Havelly, ed. Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1994, p. 47. See also the beginning of the Book II (p. 53) where the dreamer asserts the special status of his vision in comparison to those of the famous Old Testament dreamers: Prophet Isaiah, the Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Walter J. Ong recognised as ‘interiorisation of writing’,²¹ the point at which the new technologies (such as writing) stop being ‘mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness’.²²

Such attitudes are still not found in the sagas and Serbian epic poetry. By contrast, epic singers, and saga writers/scribes did not consider themselves the originators of poems or stories but rather ‘stewards of tradition’.²³ Even when they produce a new piece referring to a contemporary event (e.g. *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas* by Filip Višnjić), they would sooner say they heard it from others, than take the credit for it. As Vuk Karadžić testifies for Serbian epics:

[...] Among the common folk no one thinks it any kind of a mastery or glory to compose a new poem; and not only that no one boasts about it, but each (even precisely the one who did compose it) denies this and says that he had heard it from another.²⁴

As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, claiming that the poem is heard from another is not a sign of humility; rather, it is a gesture that places the authority of the whole collective behind the singer both in terms of the veracity of the account related, and its aesthetic value. In an oral situation (with no possibility of recourse to a text materialised on paper) attention is a precious commodity, and only the worthwhile song survives the censure of the collective at any one time and over an extended period. However ‘cunning’ this move (a move that is itself inherited, traditional, rather than personal) on the part of the singer/storyteller might seem, it is

²¹ See Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen, 1982, p. 56: ‘Writing has to be personally interiorised to affect thinking processes.’

²² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²³ Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1993, p. 76.

²⁴ ‘[...] у народу нико не држи за каку мајсторију или славу нову пјесму спјевати, и не само што се нико тим не вали, него још сваки (баш и онај, који јест) одбија од себе и каже да је чуо од другог.’ Караџић, Вук Стефановић. ‘Предговор’, *Српске народне пјесме*. Vol. I, Београд: Просвета, 1976, p. 536.

important to keep in sight that its ultimate beneficiary is still the story, not the one relating it.

c) On how stories precede their tellers

Of course, simply denying ownership is not the same as actually not owning something. What takes the singers' and traditional storytellers' disclaimer, their notion that the story does not belong to them (and ours that the story 'tells itself') beyond metaphor is the fact that even in the rare recorded cases of newly created works relating to the contemporary events such as *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*²⁵ (the number of recreated, re-performed stories being infinitely larger in any collection of traditional art), the singer/storyteller is still very much a 'trafficker of a story that always already exists'. With its reliance on the formula, standard narrative and stylistic devices, the above mentioned *Višnjić's* song still belongs to the tradition: its coming into being ultimately depends on those fifty different poems – the part of the singer's artistic inheritance (the themes, patterns and rhythms deeply embedded in the consciousness) – that Vuk estimated²⁶ enable singers to compose these 'new' ones. This could also be said about the saga writers, who, like *Višnjić*, create something that does not exactly exist anywhere else in the particular form they had given it on the vellum, yet it very much *does* exist, both in those 'fifty' different sagas, *þættir*, skaldic verses, etc., that form their inherited, enabling word-hoard, and it exists in parallel orally, actively circulating as what Carol Clover calls an 'immanent whole'.²⁷ Furthermore, after the moment of writing, the saga does not become a safely stored, definable entity, but rather continues to

²⁵ What makes this case extremely rare is not the failure of singers to engage with contemporary (not only past) historical events – this is what makes an oral tradition living, but for a literate collector to be present at such a moment.

²⁶ See chapter 1, p. 56.

²⁷ See chapter 1, p. 35.

undergo changes, becoming an instance of its distributed self. The saga scribes, as we have discussed in the previous chapter, are hardly anything like human typewriters. Rather, much like oral performers, they treat their written ‘template(s)’²⁸ with freedom, simultaneously ‘checking’ written accounts against the existing oral tradition, and bringing them up to date,²⁹ whether this concerns the spelling, or ‘setting the records straight’ (or askew, depending on the perspective) about a person or an event. And so the saga continues its oral-like existence in the new medium, with writers and scribes slowly discovering both the potential of that medium (e.g. referring the reader to other written works and so writing a succinct yet complete/true account) and responding to the yet unmet pressures that it brings (e.g. the need for chronological narration). Whether newly composed or re-performed, as an instance of itself a traditional narrative (a saga/an epic poem) is as Albert B. Lord argued ‘a unique event’, ‘an original’ ascribable to a single author (regardless of whether we can name him/her or not); but traditional narratives also exist beyond any particular instances, and so they are at the same time products that have ‘no “author” but a multiplicity of authors’.³⁰

The danger inherent in the term ‘multiplicity’ is that authorship of traditional texts would be conceived of in terms of mere adage, i.e. it brings to mind a tidy string of individuals each making a definable contribution in this ‘Chinese whisper’ chain stretching back into the murky depths of unrecorded history. Theoretically, all one would need in order to get to the first, well concealed link in the chain (*the*

²⁸ Sometimes they are looking at more than one manuscript – be that a couple of renderings of the same saga, or the sagas that refer to the same event as the one they are copying, or not a saga at all, but a variant of the *Landnámabók*, etc.

²⁹ The past needs to fit the present, not only other way around. As Walter J. Ong points out: ‘[...] oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance’. (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 46; for some recorded examples of this, see p. 48.)

³⁰ Lord, Albert Bates. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 102.

author?), is some sort of a ‘good flashlight’ to penetrate the darkness – a time machine, for example. But, as Lord was probably aware, such a contraption would hardly be of any use because ‘the authors’ engaged in creating a poem are not connected in such a linear fashion. For example, if we considered tracing the origins of Višnjić’s song,³¹ at its very first line: ‘God dear! What great wonder!’ (‘Боже мили! Чуда великога!’),³² what we hoped to be a ‘string’ (something one can actually follow) would immediately start splitting at its tip, shooting innumerable threads both horizontally/synchronically towards other singers, Višnjić’s contemporaries who employed the same line (in the extant corpus it makes an appearance in a significant number of songs); and vertically/ diachronically, as each of our horizontal stoppage points (particular singers) would sprout further innumerable filaments towards their predecessors (conscious or unwitting ‘teachers’) who contributed to the development of their craft, the process of horizontal and vertical sprouting continuing *ad infinitum* at each of the subsequent stoppage points, or nodes in what more and more resembles an ever widening web, a network.

The texture of this network is hardly as regular as that of a fishing net, or a jumper: there is no way of telling how many filaments each singer-node will sprout and of what thickness these will be, i.e. not all relationships between the nodes/singers will carry the same weight, some will be more important/influential than others. There is no regularity in the way of sprouting, or the intervals in the progression of branching either: the threads would not always depart from one another – some would occasionally merge into one and the same point (e.g. two

³¹ With negligible adjustments, the above thought experiment (search for origins of Višnjić’s *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*) is applicable to sagas as well as any other traditional narrative/work of art. I could have well used a saga writer as the starting point, but thought that the points will be easier to grasp (our sensibilities about authorship would not require an abrupt adjustment) if we worked with a well-documented case such as that of Višnjić.

³² Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 100.

different singers shared the same ‘teacher’), some would also have to loop back into the point from which they started (such would be the ones relating to a particular singer’s own applications of the same line in other songs from his/her repertoire, i.e. he has also learnt the usage of the line from himself, placing it in different contexts), while some would still split further, at different speeds, entwining, converging and diverging, entering ever more complex interrelationships. The fact that fishing and football nets, jumpers and even such intricate webs that spiders make are all inadequate analogues for our network does not mean that such analogues do not exist. Indeed, along with brains, organisms, eco-systems, societies, economic markets, etc., our authorial web constitutes in fact an excellent example of a neural network.

I shall soon return to this analogy, but first, let me note on another level of complexity involved in our web model, the level created as soon as we realise that in our origins search for ‘God dear! What great wonder!’, we also need to include some of its cognate phrases, such as: ‘Dear God! What Great wonder (‘Мили Боже, чуда великога!’),³³ or ‘Dear God, what huge wonder!’ (‘Мили Боже, чуда големога!’). In the first case (we encounter it, for example, in *The Wedding of Milić the Ensign*³⁴ and *The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes*³⁵) the first two words are transposed, so that the adjective *мили* (‘dear’) comes before (rather than after as in *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*) the noun *Боже* (voc. sing of ‘God’). In the second

³³ We shall ignore the differences in spelling (‘Бор’ is sometimes spelt with the capital, and at other times with the lower case letter) and orthography (the line is sometimes written as one, and on other occasions as two sentences; even as one sentence, its two distinct parts are sometimes separated by a comma, sometimes by a colon) of these phrases, because they can be ascribed to the idiosyncratic usage of the collector/editor working with the print medium, rather than the singer. To some extent, we need to allow that the collector’s different orthography is an attempt to reflect the particular singer’s pattern of speech (pauses, emphases), but these would be impossible to track or separate from the instances of the collectors’ own usage which, to complicate the matter further, need not have been regular itself.

³⁴ Караџић, Vol. III, p. 364.

³⁵ Караџић, Vol. II, p. 220.

example the same is in addition followed by the exchange of the adjective *великога* (gen. sing.³⁶ of ‘great’) relating to the noun *чуда* (gen. sing. of ‘wonder’) for its synonym *големога* (gen. sing. of ‘huge’). For example, the song *Little Radojica*³⁷ and another song collected from Višnjić, *Saint Savo Again*,³⁸ contain such a line. The reason we need to consider these cognate phrases is the fact that in an oral situation a singer often hears one phrase from his predecessor but utters the slightly mutated version in the full conviction that he had repeated the phrase exactly.

Albert Lord’s discussion of this phenomenon is particularly interesting. One of the singers that Parry and Lord observed, Đemal Zogić claimed that he could repeat any song he hears ‘word for word, and line for line’.³⁹ An experiment was conducted and, although indeed Zogić’s version closely resembled that of Sulejman Makić from whom he had learnt it, the two were not completely the same. Lord comments:

Was Zogić lying to us? No, because he was singing the story as he conceived it as being “like” Makić’s story [...]. What is of importance here is not exactness or the lack of exactness, but constant emphasis on his role in the tradition.⁴⁰

This role, Lord continues, brings out in the singer both the preserver of tradition and the creative artist; it consists in the ‘preservation of tradition by constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly retold’.⁴¹ So, unless our singer sins against ‘the truth’ in some way, or makes a gross metrical error that would alert the attention of his ‘teacher’ or the audience, not only he, but no one else is likely to

³⁶ Here and in two subsequent places, the slightly poetic usage of language warrants a genitive rather than the accusative case.

³⁷ Караџић, Vol. III, p. 255.

³⁸ Караџић, Vol. II, p. 81. Note that the titles to the Serbian epic songs were given not by the singers, but subsequently by the collectors/editors. The singers usually identify their songs either by the first line (e.g. ‘Marko Kraljević rose early’), or descriptively, referring to the event and/or the characters that take part in it (e.g. ‘About the Battle of Čokešina’ or ‘About the duel between Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman’). The reason this one is called *Saint Savo Again* (*Onem Čemu Saso*) is because in the collection it appears immediately after another version about St. Sava, the one recorded from Blind Stepanija.

³⁹ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

notice the difference either: for all intents and purposes, the lines ‘God dear! What great wonder!’ and ‘Dear God, what huge wonder!’ are one and the same line. As we have seen above, Višnjić obviously uses these interchangeably, with the first appearing in *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*, and the second in *Saint Savo Again*. This is not because singers and their audiences were not discerning enough, but because only with the existence of a fixed medium such differences indeed become differences (i.e. become relevant), but even then not immediately: the process takes some getting used to, the written medium has to be well interiorised.⁴² Otherwise, as discussed above and in the previous chapter,⁴³ the oral-derived written literature such as our sagas of Icelanders continues to be created in accordance with oral creative principles: these simply get carried over into the new written medium.⁴⁴ The manuscript text, as we have seen, is hardly considered sacrosanct, but is more or less treated as another performance of the story that still needs to be ‘well and truly told’.

If indeed the phrases such as ‘God dear! What great wonder!’ and ‘Dear God, what huge wonder!’ can be viewed as one and the same, the question that immediately arises is the following: at precisely what degree of variation are we supposed to draw the line? What do we do with the phrases such as: ‘Dear God, thank you for everything!’ (‘Мили Боже, на свему ти хвала!’), ‘Praised be God,

⁴² See Ong, note 20 above.

⁴³ See chapter 1, pp. 34–44.

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that this behaviour is not only limited to transition from one medium to another but is often characteristic of the transition in general. The colonisation of Iceland itself is a good example. Iceland being an island, one would think that the settlers would immediately make fishing their major industry. This, however, happened only in the fourteenth century (circa five hundred years after the colonisation), the occupation from the old country, sheep rearing, providing the main means of sustenance and basis for trade. It is only after this and other attempts to live in Norwegian fashion (e.g. building houses out of timber) failed, leading to overgrazing and destruction of the scarce woods, that other avenues were explored, or given more prominence.

praised be the great⁴⁵ one!' ('Фала Богу, фала великоме!'), or 'Wait, brothers, till I tell you of a wonder!' ('Стан'те, браћо, да ви чудо кажем!'). The first two indeed invoke God, but none refers to a great wonder, and the third does just the opposite, so perhaps this difference is enough – we should not pursue these lines further. Yet can we afford not to? Just as words in a language, these units of a poetic idiom mutate and acquire different/new meanings *in usage*, in being applied in different contexts. Hence, any search for origins needs to be a consideration of the usage (a sort of 'poetic pragmatics') of the scrutinised units as well. Viewed from the perspective of usage, it becomes clear that there is more difference between 'Dear God, what great wonder!' phrase as used in *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas* (the sense of wonder at first relates to cosmic kind of wonders: bloody banners appearing in the sky, lightening striking in midwinter, etc., that all lead to the greatest of them all: an all-out uprising against the Turks) and that very same phrase as used in *The Wedding of Milić the Ensign* (the singer is wondering at the beauty and splendour of the hero's wedding party), or in *Little Radojica* (the source of wonder is the wanton revelling of Bećir aga on capture of the outlaw Radojica), than there is between 'Dear God, what great wonder!' as used in *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas* and 'Praised be God, praised be the great one!' as used in another song depicting the same event (a version from Montenegro),⁴⁶ because the source of both the sense of wonder before God in the first poem and the praise directed to him in the second are the same: the uprising against the Turks. Clearly, this 'sameness by function' would open a window for inclusion in our origins search of the phrases that completely differ from one another in wording.

⁴⁵ A possible variation for 'the great one' is 'the only one'. See for example: *Царица Милица и змај од Јастренца*. In Караџић, Vol. II, p. 187; or: *Опет Морачани с Турцима*. In Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 262.

⁴⁶ Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 114.

Our authorial network becomes even more entangled if, among these author-nodes, we include not only the actual performers, but audience members too. As Lord observes, composition, reception and transmission are in traditional art inseparable, at most they are ‘different facets of the same process’.⁴⁷ The audience actively participates in shaping the tradition by rewarding some and discouraging other performances, thus increasing/decreasing the chance of expressions such as ‘God dear! What great wonder!’ to replicate themselves and evolve further, i.e. to be taken up by other singers. Notice also that we are still engaged with the first line of ‘Višnjić’s’ poem; what of other such formulaic lines that appear throughout *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas* (e.g. ‘before dawn and the white day’/‘Прије зоре и бијела дана;’⁴⁸ ‘he drew the sabre, he cut off his head’/ ‘Трже сабљу, одсече му главу’⁴⁹), or themes and motifs (e.g. gathering of a council, consulting books of olden times to foretell the future, putting the worthiest man at the lowliest place at the table, etc.)?

d) Enter the distributed author

The reader will be relieved to learn that I shall not attempt to trace these any further; the point of the above imaginary journey was to show that the origins of a traditional narrative (or indeed any piece of traditional art) are not simply obscured by the lack of an adequate historical record, but by the complex process of its coming into being, the process in which singers (and by extension, the saga writers) never start from a ‘clean slate/sheet’. Being distributed across the networks of minds at any one time (synchronically), and across generations of minds over extensive periods of time (diachronically), a Serbian epic song or an Icelandic saga constitutes what Alfred

⁴⁷ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Gell terms ‘a *distributed object*’,⁵⁰ each of its particular instances (oral or manuscript realisations) resonating with other such instances and corresponding to all other artworks in the system/tradition. This dynamics that renders any search for origins meaningless, is in the sciences that deal with neural networks (sciences of complex adaptive systems such as artificial intelligence, evolutionary computation, cognitive psychology) known as *distributed representation*:

A distributed representation is one in which meaning is not captured by a single symbolic unit, but rather *arises* from the interaction of a set of units, normally in a network of some sort.⁵¹

As we have seen above, a piece of traditional art arises precisely from such networks of interrelated ‘units’ (singers, saga tellers/writers), each of these units making a local (in our case also a creative, sometimes even unique) contribution, but none in particular being responsible for the development of the whole: this creativity irreducibly occurs at the level beyond an individual, the level I propose to call the *distributed author*.

It needs to be said that ‘distributed author’ already appears as a critical term, and is used to describe collaborative literary efforts on the Internet. However, the use of this modern term is not only unnecessarily limited in this modern context, but is in some respects rather superficial too, as it often merely relates to projects where many (named or anonymous) individuals contribute their discrete entries to create a composite, complicated, but not necessarily a complex, evolved form, a form with genuinely intractable origins. Such is for example the project known as the “noon quilt,” consisting of an ever-expanding patchwork of descriptions of what people see

⁵⁰ Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. See in particular pp. 220-223.

⁵¹ *Philosophy of Mind Dictionary*. [online] Available at: <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/distributedrepresentation>. [11 June 2004]. My emphasis.

through their window at noon.⁵² This indeed is more like a product of the ‘multiplicity of authors’ than the distributed author in that the relation between the contributors is that of adage: there are no complex ways of interacting, free meddling in each other’s texts, risking the deletion of a contribution, meshing and clashing, negotiations of perspectives. This does not mean that the project ends up being a mere sum of its parts: to be sure, the aesthetics of the work as a whole is being negotiated between the separate texts, with each gaining ‘a new relevance by being embedded within the texts they could not foresee or refer to’.⁵³ At the same time the entire project (the unforeseeability of relationships and all) is a piece of conceptual (and in that sense very much foreseen) art, so the authorship becomes ultimately assigned to the individual with whom the concept originates, i.e. the creator of the website, the one who puts things into motion.

In this study, the purposefully oxymoronic expression ‘distributed author’ is chosen to account for both the process of distributed representation that is taking place in traditional art, and the simultaneous narrative coherence, the absence of the collage or patchwork forms. The term is also particularly suited to traditional narratives: unlike the coherence of other objects that might also be considered distributed, either the above “noon quilt,” or a china dinner-set (a particularly apt example from Alfred Gell) which owe their distributed oneness to a ‘prior design’⁵⁴ of a ‘central executive organization’⁵⁵ (i.e., the conceptual web-artist, or Spode/Wedgwood staff in Gell’s example), the coherence of a distributed traditional work

⁵² See for example Heibach, Christiane. (2000) ‘The Distributed Author: Creativity in the Age of Computer Networks.’ *Dichtung-digital* [online], 6. Available at: www.dichtung-digital.de/2000/Heibach/23.Aug [09/02/2005].

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 221.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

of art comes about ‘only by historical accretion (and deletion)’,⁵⁶ in other words – by evolution.

e) How stories tell themselves (or the blind storyteller)

Other than the question-begging,⁵⁷ theological explanations, the only other kind of account we have of the ‘stories that tell themselves’, or of the ‘text that writes itself’, or the structure that organises itself in general, is the Darwinian kind – one or the other implementation of the ‘generate-and-test’ principle (or the variation-and-selection mechanism) of evolutionary computation. And the only kind of organisational architecture that seems capable of evolutionary computation (homing in on solutions rather than envisaging/foreseeing them) is that of a network of relationships. Finally, the representational nature of such systems turns out not to be really representational at all. Rather, any ‘representation’ there is the outcome of a process we earlier called distributed representation. The ‘essential nature’ of distributed representation is that of blindness, for it is only a representation *in effect*... The (fore)seeing here is process-led; i.e., does not come before the storytelling, but is ‘thought-of-through-doing’.

This may be a relatively new vocabulary of concepts, but to an artist of any age it would not be that surprising, for much of it has already been intuited throughout the history of art (practice). Poets, musicians, visual artists of various periods have often confessed to (even worshipped) this kind of blindness, indicating that the artiness of an artwork is hardly all down to a talented human agent. To suspend for the moment Structuralist and Poststructuralist theories that effectively destabilise the absolute

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵⁷ Who is the Author/Origin of the Author? And the Author of the Author of the Author? ...

authority of the author (e.g. those of Barthes,⁵⁸ Foucault,⁵⁹ Derrida,⁶⁰) the most successful of artists have themselves professed that at some point(s) during the creative process their work tends to ‘take over’, that they feel themselves ‘out of control’, or that they miraculously managed to achieve more than they are actually capable of, the instances also lurking behind the critics’ folklore about Dostoevsky the Novelist or T.S. Eliot the Poet, for example, being ‘greater’ than Dostoevsky or T.S. Eliot the Man. Writers through ages have, using the knowledge and terminology of their time, ascribed this feeling to Muses, divine inspiration, Genius, the Unconscious, etc., only to be accused by their successors of transcendentalism and mysticism. But there is, according to the sciences of complex adaptive systems, a kind of transcendence that is quite of this world, demystified through modelling and experimentation,⁶¹ and at the same time the kind we all have an intuitive experience of:

We know that our universe obeys simple low-level rules [...]. We also know that life behaves in ways that do not seem to be built explicitly into those rules [...]; life seems to transcend the rigidity of its physical origins. This kind of transcendence is called “emergence.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Barthes, Roland. ‘The Death of the Author’ in: Burke, Seán, ed. *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 125-130.

⁵⁹ Foucault, Michel. ‘What is an author?’ in: Lodge, David, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London: Longman, 1988, pp. 197-210.

⁶⁰ Derrida, Jacques. ‘Signature, Event, Context’ in: Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, pp. 309-330.

⁶¹ Nowadays scientists routinely implement neural networks and evolutionary algorithms, cellular automata and other non-linear parallel-processing systems for experimental and modelling purposes. John Conway’s ‘Game of Life’ (or ‘Life’) is probably one of the most famous cellular automata that, for all the simplicity of the rules that define its dynamic, is nevertheless capable of emulating arbitrarily complex behaviour, often featuring emergent structures that in no obvious way relate to the design of the game. The complete dynamic of ‘Life’ is captured in three sentences that specify what is equivalent to the laws of elementary physics of this artificial universe, and yet, when played out, a bewildering array of forms and behaviour emerge that mirror some of the familiar behaviour of our world (i.e. there are forms that eat other forms, that reproduce and die, escape ‘predators’, forms that act as parasites, etc.). For more detail, or even having a go at playing with ‘Life’, see Callahan. Paul. ‘What is Game of Life?’ (2000) *Math.com*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.math.com/students/wonders/life/life.html> [26/08/2005].

⁶² Stewart, Ian. *Life’s Other Secret: The New Mathematics of the Living World*. London: Penguin, 1998, p. 7.

Evidently, emergence and also distributed representation – an emergent phenomenon that is, as we have seen, particularly pertinent to this study, represent potent concepts to explore and the prospect of a fruitful cross-fertilisation of the studies of complex systems with the humanities has already excited interest of some literary theorists⁶³ and philosophers.⁶⁴ Paradoxically, studies of oral and oral-derived literature that stand to benefit most from such cross-fertilisation represent an area of academic endeavour where such prospects are least explored.⁶⁵

The reason I think studies of oral verbal art and oral-derived medieval narratives stand to benefit most from the sciences of complexity is based on the fact that the chances of the emergent phenomena (such as the story ‘taking over’, or ‘telling itself’) occurring without being channelled away by a centralising factor are significantly amplified in traditional rather than in author-generated,⁶⁶ Gutenbergian texts. The latter, where the creative process involves a single author, is much more akin to building or construction – it is a process of a significantly shorter duration (limited to a human lifetime at the very most, but more often quite a bit shorter than that) and, most importantly, something with a more defined trajectory, being under the scrutiny (if not total control) of a single mind. In other words the process has an overseer/ a foreseer that tames it. By contrast, in traditional narratives such an overseer does not exist, or if it does (at least it looks like it does, in that the stories are far from being chaotic), then it is the blind evolutionary watchmaker (as Richard

⁶³ See for example Carroll, Joseph. *Evolution and Literary Theory*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995. Also: Hayles, Katherine, ed. *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991.

⁶⁴ E.g. Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*. London: Routledge, 2000.

⁶⁵ This relationship would truly be reciprocal: while the studies of oral and oral-derived texts would in the sciences of complexity find apt concepts to refresh the existing theoretical vocabulary, the sciences of complexity would in traditional texts find good case studies on which to test their premises.

⁶⁶ By ‘author-generated’ text I mean nothing more than a text written by one person in the age of print.

Dawkins has christened it⁶⁷), not the Watchmaker (Author-God) of the Laplacian clockwork universe.

Crediting the very mechanics (brute mechanics?) of narrative production with the kind of artistic accomplishment that we are used to associating with the painstaking genius raises an anxiety. Yet, both premises – that there is something inherently brute (i.e. not creative) in mechanisms and that creativity is the sole property of humans – are flawed. The latter is little more than ‘a piece of snobbery’⁶⁸ that rests upon a myth⁶⁹ about beings forming a ladder, or a scale with the ‘higher’ (the most creative) ones occupying higher, and the ‘lower’ ones lower perches. The former, on the other hand, rests on the likewise dated notion of the mechanism. For, there are mechanisms and *mechanisms*. It is the inherited image of a nineteenth-century machine (with its levers, cogs, and boilers) that so desperately fails to impress as anything like life, let alone as capable of creativity. So if we merely update our conception of the mechanism based on the machines of our own day, some blurring of the mechanical-creative divide would already be inevitable, for some of our machines do seem to be learning, adapting and solving problems creatively (e.g. there is an entire scientific discipline that studies simulations of life, whether ‘earthbound’ or merely possible or lifelike;⁷⁰ appropriately, it is called a-life). This more contemporary notion is still machine-informed, and so too echoes embarrassingly clunky in comparison with our prime model of creative mechanism –

⁶⁷ Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker*. London: Penguin, 1986.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁶⁹ Like any other myth this one too is not a *mere* fabrication. From various (human) aspects humans can indeed be considered the most successful (the ‘highest’ of species) and when it comes to their impact on the planet, only certain kinds of bacteria provide a matching contestant. It is however important to recognise that humans win in the ladder game only when human criteria for forming the ladder are applied: when it comes to navigating in the dark, it is bats and whales that are the ‘highest species’, as are ants when the desired goal is carrying seven times your own body weight, and when it comes to surviving nuclear holocausts, apparently, rats and beetles are second to none.

⁷⁰ For an introductory survey of interesting experiments (e.g. Fritz Vollrath’s cyberspiders, Craig Reynolds’s study of flocking behaviour of birds on virtual creatures he devised – ‘boids’, etc.), see Stewart, *Life’s Other Secret*, especially chapter 10: ‘An Exaltation of Boids’, pp. 195-212.

biological evolution. Creativity itself (as life, learning and even as genius⁷¹) is now increasingly explored in terms of evolutionary mechanics.⁷²

There also exists an anxiety as to what happens to individuality of individuals within a network. Being a unit/node of an evolving network is nothing like being a cog in a totalitarian regime: in the latter it is the centralising power invested in the Big Brother that divests one of his/her uniqueness (oneness) through drastically reducing the effect of one's actions. As a result the whole (social) network becomes stultified, its ability to adapt becomes crippled. By contrast, as we have noted, evolving networks have no such centres, they create individuality and are in turn created by it. The Saussurean model of language (an evolving system with the architecture of a network) is a perfect case in point: 'individuality' of units in a language is only created in relation to other such units: they have no essences, no identities apart from those arbitrarily assigned within the network. In turn, the language can only function because of the differences between the units. The relationships between the units within the neural network are not all the same either, some carry more weight than others (which ones get to be weightier and at what time is, again, arbitrary): without the dynamic of differences, complex systems would not exist. As Paul Cilliers observes, 'equilibrium is another word for death'.⁷³

That traditional narratives such as the Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics evolve does not diminish the importance of either the individuality or the talent of particular singers or the saga writers. As we have seen in the previous chapter, if a singer or a saga author is talented like Tešan Podrugović or the writer of *Njáls saga*, their particular renderings stand a better chance of 'survival' or replication, i.e. they

⁷¹ See Simonton, Dean Keith. *Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷² See Boden, Margaret. *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. London: Routledge, 2004.

⁷³ Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, p. 4.

stand a better chance of being accepted by other singers/scribes and transmitted further. But this in itself is far from being enough, because what it precisely means to be talented or successful varies; it depends on an intractable number of factors in the environment (social environment in our case). There is no means of telling which singer's or saga teller's/writer's/scribe's contribution will prove successful in the long run, or in what way it will be successful either: like in all evolutionary processes, the success/failure is always something that can only be speculated on *a posteriori*. For example, I have noted in the previous chapter⁷⁴ that out of two singers (Filip Višnjić and Old Milija), both considered talented by their communities, it is the verses from Višnjić's songs about the First Serbian Uprising that were employed by the singers⁷⁵ who composed poems about the Second Uprising and the Montenegrin wars for liberation, whereas Old Milija's variations on *Banović Strahinja* were not (or at least no recording was made of a performance by another singer that in some way resonates with Milija's). There is a number of possible explanations for this development: for instance, we might say that Višnjić's songs provided a sizeable yet rare body of templates for dealing specifically with contemporary events. The times themselves (with one uprising closely followed by another) were also especially conducive to Višnjić's songs – the fact that they dealt with events in which people in the audience (including the singers themselves⁷⁶) were actually participating, must have made them extremely popular. Finally,

⁷⁴ See chapter 1, pp. 61-62.

⁷⁵ And not only singers, but also literate poets (e.g. Petar II Petrović Njegoš) and historians (e.g. Vuk Karadžić) of the time. Božidar Tomić has argued that Karadžić's description of the battle of Čokešina contain whole song passages that were transferred into prose. See Недић, Владан. *Букови певачи*. Београд: Рад, 1990, p. 61.

⁷⁶ Old Raško who composed the *Battle of Deligrad* had actually participated in that battle, and Višnjić, although blind and could not fight, was raising the spirits of the insurgents in the besieged Loznica with his singing. See Недић, *Букови певачи*, pp. 38-39.

Višnjić's closer adherence to the traditional idiom has made his kind of 'inventions' more easily transferable (i.e. adoptable by other singers) than those made by Milija.

But these explanations are still not conclusive because they are tied to our particular observed moment. Capturing tradition on paper, like pinning down a butterfly or 'photographing Proteus' (to paraphrase Lord⁷⁷), meant effectively killing it, so following the further fates of both Višnjić's and Milija's contribution was made impossible. As the significance of the Uprisings faded before new, more important events, it is conceivable that the popularity of Višnjić's songs would wane and that some would even be forgotten or merge into other songs. On the other hand, like with our bodies where not all genes get to be expressed but lie dormant only to be expressed in our descendants (or, indeed, never to be expressed),⁷⁸ the subtle narrative twists like finding a soul mate where one least expects it – in the enemy camp, or bearing the betrayal with dignity (as Milija's Strahinja does) rather than avenging it, may have 'lain dormant' only to reappear later (not necessarily in the character of Strahinja), or be discovered all over again at a time that will for one reason and another be more attuned to individual psychologies, rather than great national movements.

While the individual singers and saga writers invest in their renderings all their individuality, all their intellectual, emotional and creative powers, all their ideology, their small-mindedness and generosity of spirit (in this they do not differ from modern-day authors), as we have seen in the above examples, these investments remain local in respect to the development of the story itself that was and continues to be subject to evolutionary 'accretions and deletions'. In this process no particular

⁷⁷ See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 124.

⁷⁸ Despite its utter implausibility, Kevin Costner's film *Waterworld* offers a sort of an illustration of this phenomenon. Under the pressure to adapt to living on water (after the nuclear holocaust, all dry land was flooded), some humans, including the hero, grow gills and webbed toes. Presumably, the dormant genes that we also share with fish were reactivated.

agent gets an upper hand and whatever bias (an attempt at foresight) there is, it eventually gets overridden – challenged from within by the inherited perspectives, and getting swamped with the ones to come. Of course, as we have noted earlier, the texts with which we are dealing are not those immanent, never fully realised entities in living traditions, but evolutionary snapshots, narratives arrested in their development. In these the stamp of the last contributor is (in respect to his/her predecessors) always more keenly felt, yet, we must be careful not to overemphasise it. As (in a quite literal sense) s/he never creates from a blank page, the impact of the incidental last singer/storyteller/scribe⁷⁹ is also cushioned in many ways: a recorded traditional narrative still retains the complex texture gained during its development, and through its evolved formulaic structure it remains in constant and close dialogue with other recordings of its kind. Being a product of the ‘evolutionary aesthetic’ means that this texture often gets to resemble ‘wild meadows’ rather than ‘cultivated gardens’ (the reader might recall the metaphor used in the previous chapter⁸⁰ for reading/imputing agency), giving an impression of an unmediated account. With no one granted the power to mediate and, by extension, manipulate us/pull a world over our eyes (in this world we are witnesses, or better still, voyeurs, for we are ourselves not observed/addressed), these narratives also impress as believable, realistic.

This, of course, happens under more or less ideal conditions. It should be said that although all traditional narratives are products of distributed representation, there still are ways of channelling their distributedness: the centralising (or, in

⁷⁹ When considering texts of the sagas that we normally study, we might also include here the editors of the critical editions in which, in order to offer the fullest version of the saga, material is combined from different manuscripts. For example, the *Íslensk fornrit* edition of *Egils saga* is generally based on the text from the *Möðruvallabók* compilation (A redaction), but Egill’s poem *Sonatorrek* is taken from *Ketilsbækur* (C redaction), since this is the only place where the poem is preserved in its entirety. While probably objectionable from the point of view of the manuscript studies where each separate rendering has its special value, the editors’ approach is not in itself fraudulent – it does not much differ from the already discussed attitudes of storytellers and scribes themselves.

⁸⁰ See chapter 1, pp. 72-81.

Bakhtin's terms, 'monologising') overseer/foreseer function is actually regularly imposed on evolutionary processes – not by an individual, but by the strong, enduring social institutions (e.g. centralised state, kingship, Church) that manage to exert (and sustain) their influence on art production over extensive periods of time.

We will return to these issues nearer the end of the chapter, but first let us observe how is it that traditional mechanisms produce creative accounts.

2.2 The Art of Mechanism and the Mechanism of Art

a) Creative mechanisms: 'traditional referentiality'

Aware that his theory of oral-formulaic composition might carry an unwanted connotation of formulae as something akin to literary clichés, in *The Singer of Tales*, Albert B. Lord draws attention to their remarkable adaptability/flexibility and cautions that 'usefulness of composition carries no implication of opprobrium'.⁸¹ His defence of formulae has, however, mainly emphasised their utility: formulaic technique is there to enable the singer, 'to serve him as a craftsman, not to enslave him';⁸² 'without this usefulness the style, and more important, the whole practice would collapse or would have never been born'.⁸³ Seductive on the one hand, this insistence on the formulae's ultimate role as mnemonic/improvisational devices has, on the other, given rise to a need to defend the artiness of traditional art against the utilitarian tedium: if something is primarily useful, then it cannot be all that beautiful; and if the singer is indeed a craftsman then he is not much of an artist, a genius. This reaction has in turn led to overemphasising the role of the last contributor in the development of the traditional text, splitting the studies of oral and

⁸¹ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

oral-derived literature into two camps. That for Lord himself this ‘mechanism versus aesthetic’⁸⁴ dichotomy does not exist (i.e. the utility of formulae does not in itself contradict or jeopardise the artistry of the traditional idiom) might be intuited from the following passage:

His [the singer’s] oft-used phrases and lines lose something in sharpness, yet many of them must resound with overtones from the dim past whence they come. Were we to train our ears to catch these echoes, we might cease to apply the clichés of another criticism to oral poetry and thereby become aware of its own riches.⁸⁵

Still, Lord’s main preoccupation is the working of oral tradition; he does not have the time to engage further with its aesthetics, trace the echoes and the riches that he intuitively finds there. As with any pioneering work (and *The Singer of Tales* was such a work, at least in the West), the main task is not to meet all the challenges but to outline them, to prompt a development of new sensitivities (in Lord’s case this entails questioning the validity of our ‘post-Gutenberg mentality’⁸⁶ when approaching oral and oral-derived texts), as well as to designate the possibilities for further research.

Thirty years after the publication of *The Singer of Tales*, John Miles Foley will actually start from where Lord has left off – with the question of how traditional idioms signify, how they produce aesthetic effects. For Foley, as for Lord, there is no rupture between the utility and aesthetics of formulae: traditional narratives achieve their literary effects *because* rather than *in spite of* their formality. Note how the following quotation, cast in modern terminology and expressed with more confidence (one of the few advantages that subsequent generations of scholars have

⁸⁴ For more detail see: Foley, John Miles. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

over those who paved their way) closely mirrors the points Lord makes above about the traditional art being an echoic, resounding, rather than enslaving, medium:

Traditional elements reach out of the immediate instance in which they appear to the fecund totality of the entire tradition, defined synchronically and diachronically, and they bear meanings as wide and deep as the tradition they encode. The 'how' of the traditional idiom, while overlapping at some points with 'how' of the literary text, also and crucially includes an extratextual dimension uniquely the domain of oral traditional art. This idiom is liberating rather than imprisoning, centrifugal, rather than centripetal, explosively connotative, rather than claustrophobically clichéd.⁸⁷

A special virtue of Foley's study of aesthetics of oral art is the wealth of examples that show how different oral traditions (Muslim and Christian Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic) and different oral-derived literatures (the Ancient Greek *Iliad* and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*) rely in various degrees and in their own unique ways trigger 'traditional referentiality', a metonymic process by which the whole 'immanent' tradition is summoned by its parts (i.e. orally or textually performed instances) and brought to bear on their interpretation. According to Foley, 'the ever-incomplete performance or text is the only medium through which we can completely experience the oral traditional work of art'.⁸⁸ In the light of the earlier discussion, traditional referentiality can be conceived of as the interpretative strategy that is facilitated by the special dynamics of traditional narrative production – the distributed author.

How does traditional referentiality work on our two literatures? When an audience gather to listen to a song about Marko Kraljević recovering his father's sabre, the reception is not merely conditioned by the immediate verses the singer utters. Rather, each member receives this particular, decasyllabic, incarnation of the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

story against as many of its previous incarnations (versified, or in prose⁸⁹) as they have experienced before, from, let us say, a different singer, in a different mood, under different circumstances. So, a song is an instance of the text which is not all contained in this single performance; it is, as we have discussed above, *distributed* across all previous performances and even those yet to be realised. It forever exists as a potentiality. Furthermore, the account of the particular incident of Marko avenging his father and recovering his sword is considered against other adventures of Marko, as well as other kinds of virtual entries to be found under the reference ‘Marko Kraljević’ within the tradition: his birth, his acquisition of a good steed, or, relevant to this particular song: his troubled relationship with his father Vukašin.⁹⁰

To be sure, our two traditions are no longer alive and we are not approaching the particular recorded oral renderings and oral-derived texts with the whole immanent tradition in our bones. This, however, does not mean that all aspects of the interpretative dynamics inherent in tradition (i.e. traditional referentiality) are lost to us. Each of these separate works we encounter is in a lively dialogue with the rest of the works in the corpus, continuing to create an abundance of textual possibilities. The more of the corpus we know, the better our chance to enjoy the separate works. For example, just as the reader engages with Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga* – the powerful, slightly avaricious matriarch and the avenger of her son’s death, without any effort whatsoever on the saga writers’/scribes’ part, another, rather different Þorgerðr is conjured instantaneously – the benevolent, if mischievous, sharply witted young woman managing to trick into taking some food her headstrong

⁸⁹ The reference in Karadžić’s *Serbian Dictionary* relating to Marko Kraljević suggests that there existed a rich oral lore about Marko that has not (so far as we can tell) found an expression in the epic poetry. See Караџић, Вук Стефановић. *Српски рјечник*. Београд: Просвета, 1986, pp. 486–487.

⁹⁰ For example, in *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs*, Vukašin is so enraged at Marko’s decision to support the claim to the throne of the late Tsar Dušan’s son rather than his own, that he attempts to kill him.

father who, deeply bereaved by the loss of his favourite son, decided to starve himself to death. This 'second' Þorgerðr from *Egils saga* adds new dimensions to the 'first', making her a complex character and so nuancing our response. Moreover, her father Egill's own temper, cunning and avarice (summoned in the minds of the audience by her very patronymic, *Egilsdóttir*) offers more clues as to how the young, lively Þorgerðr from *Egils saga*, becomes the embittered Þorgerðr of *Laxdæla saga*. It is through this fierce economy of 'traditional referentiality', i.e. relying on the readers'/listeners' knowledge of tradition to expand the immediate borders of the text at hand, that the always incomplete text achieves an amazing opulence and vibrancy of meaning: the experience of the immanent story is itself complete.

Formulae that today to an untrained eye indeed may appear as 'claustrophobically clichéd', had the opposite effect. What is more, the more of the corpus he or she knows, the less likely are the formulaic expressions to sound to the modern reader like the inarticulate muttering of a lover who cannot muster a better compliment than that his beloved has beautiful eyes. While the beloved will probably pout at the emptiness of the tired expression, the unstinting reader will become embroiled in an intricate web, which may not be as immense as the living tradition had once been, but which will still have preserved the ability to reward the richness of content. Whether we consider larger formulae, such as that of a young Iclander venturing on a journey, or the shorter ones, like those that involve a Serbian hero leaping to his 'nimble feet', or shedding 'terrible tears', the special way in which these instances resonate with the similar in the corpus disallow the tedium to set in.

For instance, when Kjartan from *Laxdæla saga* heads for Norway and forms a close friendship with the Norwegian princess Ingibjörg, the audience will indeed be in no suspense as to whether or not this will (negatively) affect his relationship with

his intended, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, whom he leaves behind in Iceland. From the experience of other Icelandic saga heroes (e.g. Egill, Þórólfr, Hrútr) the reader knows that Norwegian female royalty are often more trouble than they are worth, rather clingy and likely to curse you or do their best to have you killed. The suspense is, nevertheless created as to how will that all happen and what consequences will it have. Tradition again holds some clues to this puzzle. Although on one occasion in *Laxdæla saga* a mention is made of how the first marriage of Kjartan's great uncle Hrútr had ended in a divorce, and on quite another that he was a lover of the Norwegian queen Gunnhildr, no connection is made between the two instances, nor is an indication given as to the reason for the divorce. But the reader familiar with *Njáls saga* (chapter 6) will remember that it is the promiscuous and vengeful Norwegian queen (quite a different Gunnhildr from the one in *Laxdæla saga* – the vulnerable damsel who hides her face in a shawl and briskly walks away as Hrútr sails back to Iceland) that has put a curse on Hrútr. With our hero not being able to consummate the marriage,⁹¹ his wife Unnr requests and is granted a divorce (chapter 7). Hrútr's affair with the queen not only affects his personal life, but breeds fatal consequences for the whole district: after Unnr marries another man, she gives birth to the greatest villain of the saga, Mörðr Valgarðsson, whose schemes eventually bring about deaths of many noble people, the two heroes of *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr and Njáll, among them.

But what does this have to do with Kjartan? As opposed to Hrútr's liaison with Gunnhildr, Kjartan's with Ingibjörg seems rather platonic, yet it is hinted on several occasions that it might be more than that. When Kjartan's companion Bolli (a cousin and a rival too) sets out for Iceland, he reproaches Kjartan for not joining him,

⁹¹ His penis would grow too large – in her curse Gunnhildr was surprisingly mindful of Hrútr's manliness.

accusing him that it is not only the king's orders but also his beautiful sister that are keeping him in Norway: 'I also take it for granted that you remember little that might entertain you in Iceland when you're conversing with the king's sister Ingibjörg' ('en höfum þat fyrir satt, at þú munir fátt þat, er á Íslandi er til skemmtanar, þá er þú sitr á tali við Ingibjörgu konungssystur').⁹² Kjartan does not deny the accusation. Later, when he himself decides to go back, we are told that 'they [Kjartan and Ingibjörg] regretted having to part' ('þeim þótti fyrir at skiljask'),⁹³ and the gift that Ingibjörg sends for Kjartan's bride to be (a richly embroidered headdress), is not only a generous gesture, but a slightly spiteful and condescending one too:⁹⁴ 'I want Icelandic women to know that the woman you have consorted with here in Norway is hardly the descendent of slaves' ('vil ek, at þær Íslendinga konur sjál þat, at sú kona er er eigi þrælaættar, er þú hefir tal átt við í Nóregi').⁹⁵

Kjartan's relationship with the Norwegian princess, like Hrútr's with the Norwegian queen proves fatal: not only does Bolli use it to persuade Guðrún to marry him instead, but the luxurious headdress that the princess sends becomes a catalyst for a series of vengeful acts that eventually lead to the deaths of both Kjartan and Bolli, as well as some of their close kin⁹⁶ and friends. The two separate involvements of Icelandic heroes with Norwegian female royalty (Kjartan's with Ingibjörg and Hrútr's with Gunnhildr) powerfully illuminate one another and bring gravity and nuance into the interpretation of both *Laxdæla* and *Njáls saga* that would have not been available in any other way.

⁹²*The Saga of the People of Laxardal in:* Thorsson, Örnólfur, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Keneva Kunz, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p.353; *Laxdæla saga*. Einar Ól. Sveinnson, ed Íslensk fornrit, 1934, Vol. V, p. 126.

⁹³ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 357; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 131.

⁹⁴ The headdress could also be seen as the intended constant reminder for Kjartan's bride of the relationship he had in Norway with a woman of a higher birth: as Ingibjörg's metonymic extension, the headdress potentially becomes a way for her to come between the couple.

⁹⁵ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 357; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 131.

⁹⁶ What augments the tragedy here is precisely the fact that Bolli and Kjartan are close relatives themselves; in their feud the rest of the kin is forced to choose sides and so everyone loses.

Shorter (and thus more stable) formulae function along the same principles as the above described formulaic theme. Namely, if at some great grievance we witness Marko 'shedding terrible tears', or at the sight of an injustice he 'leaps to his nimble feet', just as Old Jug Bogdan or Miloš Obilić have done before him, this will not lower the intensity of his feeling in the audience, but rather the opposite. When in *The Wedding of Prince Lazar* (*Женидба кнеза Лазара*) Old Jug Bogdan 'sheds terrible tears' ('грозне сузе рони'),⁹⁷ it is at the realisation that the 'Last Times' ('пошљедње вријеме')⁹⁸ are approaching and that the little matter of giving away his daughter in marriage to a person of lower birth, is a small quibble compared to a cosmic calamity that is about to engulf the whole country, a calamity that will present itself in the shape of the Ottoman Turks. When in one of the fragments about the Kosovo battle (known as *The Prince's Supper* /*Кнежева вечера*) 'Miloš leaps to his nimble feet' ('Скочи Милош на ноге лагане'),⁹⁹ it is to refute slanderous remarks about his anticipated treason, presented in a mock-toast by the very lord whom he faithfully served. Miloš's swift leap evokes the swiftness of justice. He vows to cleanse himself of the slander by killing the sultan in the tomorrow's battle. This, of course, he does at the price of his own life. In this way the formulae in which a hero sheds terrible tears or leaps to his feet act as catalysts which trigger a vast referential field, recalling different instances of profound devastation thrown at worthy men, which gather together and lend some of their own intensity to the one the audience is momentarily listening to: the grievances of Marko Kraljević. Tradition, as these examples imply, is, in Foley's words: the 'silent but ever-present partner of the text'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Женидба кнеза Лазара*, in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 138.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁹⁹ *Комади од различнијех косовскијех пјесама*, in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 225.

¹⁰⁰ Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 60.

b) ‘Traditional referentiality’ = intertextuality?

The process just described as pertaining to oral and oral-derived literature is still very much akin to that of intertextuality, and the *literary* tradition as the ‘silent partner’ of a *written* piece has already been identified by T. S. Eliot in his famous essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent.’

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.¹⁰¹

I do not think that there is a principal, qualitative difference between the concepts of ‘intertextuality’ and ‘traditional referentiality’. In fact, in her study of the poetics of epic formulae, Mirjana Detelić quite happily (and in the context of her work justifiably) designates ‘intertextuality’ as the most important function of oral formulae.¹⁰² Any difference that there is between the two dynamics lies in the way they play themselves out, as the two mediums (one fluid, the other fixed) put different pressures on the singers/storytellers/scribes on the one, and literary authors on the other hand, as well as build up different attitudes and expectations in their respective audiences.

I have already mentioned the virtual reference ‘Marko Kraljević’ within the oral tradition to which each new performance about Marko’s exploits immediately refers its recipients. We can easily think of analogous virtual references within the literary tradition – a literary ‘Ulysses’ reference, or for that matter, a literary ‘Marko Kraljević’ reference. Unlike an oral counterpart, a literary reference such as ‘Ulysses’ would, along with the rather straightforward entries such as Homer’s Odysseus and Sophocle’s Odysseus, Dante’s Ulysses and Tennyson’s Ulysses equally include James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, while the virtual literary (as opposed

¹⁰¹ Eliot, T. S. ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in: Burke, *Authorship*, p. 74.

¹⁰² Детелић, Мирјана. *Урок и невеста: поетика епске формуле*. Београд: Чигоја, 1996, p. 78.

to the virtual oral) 'Marko Kraljević' reference would include the bewildered and disappointed Marko Kraljević from Domanović's satire and, equally, Ćopić's awkward but fearless partisan hero, Nikoletina Bursać. These literary virtual references would function in a very similar (but as we shall see not quite the same) way to their oral counterparts.

For example, if I were to write a poem in which I longingly address my hometown of Smederevo 'My sweet, my immensely desired Ithaca,/ Will your blooming Leopolda never wake from this nightmare that is history/ And reach your loving, your life-giving shores?', an accidental reader would tap into his or her mental 'Ulysses' reference, just as readily as the oral audience listening to a new variant about Marko recovering his father's sabre would immediately tap into their 'Marko Kraljević' reference.¹⁰³ But while the recipient of an oral variant would evaluate it in terms of how true, how close this particular Marko is to the immanent 'Marko' (an emergent Marko created by the distributed author and the one into which all the performed, ephemeral Markos inevitably disappear, adding a quirk here, taking one away there, or, doing nothing), my despondent reader (let us make him slightly pompous too) would most likely comment along the lines of the following: 'A conformist, pathos-laden attempt at feeding off the power of Odyssean nostalgia. An uninspiring(/ed?) female Ulysses aimlessly drawing on Joyce, bereft of poignancy, simply grotesque'. As opposed to his oral counterpart, my reader's chief concern would be with how successfully my poem *differs* from the definable,

¹⁰³ The examples I chose here primarily correspond to the subtype of intertextuality which Gérard Genette specifies as 'hypotextuality'. See Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 204. It is here that both the similarities to and differences from 'traditional referentiality' become most apparent.

corporeal entries comprising the 'Ulysses' reference.¹⁰⁴ In other words, my reader's chief concern would be with the poem's originality.

While asserting the positive, creative role of tradition in respect to the formation of the individual talent ('I am part of all that I have met',¹⁰⁵ Tennyson's Ulysses agrees), when it comes to the contribution of the individual, Eliot still insists on novelty ('novelty is better than repetition'¹⁰⁶) at the expense of crude emulation ('aping', Chaucer would say) of the illustrious precursors:

To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.¹⁰⁷

What Eliot endeavours to dispense with is the Romantic myth of the genius, contextualising instead the author's creativity within literary tradition, and the theoreticians to come after him will further displace, and announce as dead too, the author as the origin of meaning, situating the meaning instead within societal institutions (Foucault), the reader (Barthes, Fish), or postulating its continual deferral (Derrida). What is not disputed, however, is the existence of an impulse towards originality on behalf of the Post-Renaissance authors and the expectation of the same on behalf of the Post-Renaissance readers. Denying the 'Author' originary function, Barthes still invests his 'scriptor' with the 'power to mix writings',¹⁰⁸ specifying further that this should be done 'in such a way as never to rest on any one

¹⁰⁴ To their detriment, he or she could now not escape including 'Leopolda Ranković' under their 'Ulysses' reference, finding some consolation in the fact that the inferiority of the poem will be sure to keep this entry away from affecting (infecting) the general public's 'Ulysses;' or, if of more saturnine disposition, my reader might yet find some satirical use of my poem. But there also is another and much more important source of consolation: neither does the virtual 'Ulysses' reference, nor Joyce's *Ulysses* hang on to my poem for dear life, as their oral counterpart would have.

¹⁰⁵ Tennyson. Alfred Lord. 'Ulysses' in: Tennyson. Alfred Lord. *Poems and Plays*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 89.

¹⁰⁶ Eliot, 'Tradition', p. 74.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁸ Barthes, 'The Death', p. 128.

of them'.¹⁰⁹ 'Not to rest' on a particular writing is to diverge, to change, become new. In other words, only by differing from the *Odyssey* and the *Ulysses* in a meaningful way would my poem truly 'conform' (in Eliot's sense) to the 'Ulysses' reference and become an invigorating extension of its literary precursors, perhaps even occasioning a renewed interest in the *Odyssey* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, while they would in turn lend my poem some of their own intensity. For all the interactions that occur between the entries that comprise the literary 'Ulysses' reference, they remain discrete, autonomous (if not independent) entities; in fact, it is only because I rely on their relatively safe, separate existence that I can call my character Leopolda (and yet expect her to be recognised as some kind of a female Ulysses figure) to begin with.

While it is not up to my poem to keep either the *Odyssey* or the *Ulysses* alive, the oral entries that contribute to the traditional virtual reference 'Marko Kraljević' on the other hand are in constant need of resuscitation because they are virtual/ephemeral themselves. Their basic physics is vitally dependent on continual performances of songs about Marko (and not some Nikoletina with Marko's characteristics),¹¹⁰ good or bad renderings, inspired or not.¹¹¹ When the text is perpetually fluid, impossible to grasp as a fixed object, the variability is a given – as Lord says, 'the differences are inherent in the very process of transmission and

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹¹⁰ They would either bifurcate into two separate references or one would simply absorb another - there would be no place for both under the same reference.

¹¹¹ This is not to say that an oral audience is aesthetically indifferent – as we have discussed earlier, if there is a Višnjić, or a Podrugović around, people would much rather listen to their renderings than those of just any old (or actually, young) singer. But for a story to survive, it does not matter whether it is well or badly performed. Just as long as the song is around, surprisingly little appears to be lost by a bad performance. As Vuk Karadžić remarks: '[...] a good singer mends even a bad song, in accordance with other songs he knows. Thus, I think, were some Podrugović to hear the worst song today, he would, after a few days, say it nicely and in the right order, the way his other songs are' ('[...] добар певач и рђаву песму поправи према осталим песмама, које зна. Тако ја мислим, да какав Подруговић данас чује најгору песму, он би је после неколико дана казао онако лепо по реду, као што су и остале његове песме'). Караџић, 'Предговор', Vol. IV, p 378.

composition'¹¹² – and so the pressure is on preservation. This pressure will produce a situation in which there is nothing 'mere' about conforming (conforming to what exactly?), and in which 'emulation' (reliance on formulae) because it always implies a re-creation never comes close to resembling a literary cliché. A true repetition, or, to be more precise, *reduplication*, only becomes possible when the text one is repeating is safely stored somewhere,¹¹³ available for inspection. It is only when the fixity of the text is granted (by writing and even more so, by print), that Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' sets in. While 'all tradition in the form of writing is simultaneous with present time',¹¹⁴ as Judith Still and Michael Worton point out, 'the writer's (and the reader's) relationship with this tradition is usually, perhaps necessarily, one of contestation'.¹¹⁵ Free from the pressure for preservation,¹¹⁶ writers face the pressure for variation, and so originality (if not origination) becomes an expectation.

¹¹² Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 112.

¹¹³ One might object here and say that oral texts are also stored, not on paper to be sure, but in memory. The objection is, however, invalid, as the conception of memory as storage has long been discredited by the neurologists who explain the functioning of memory in terms of the already described process of distributed representation. If the memories were indeed stored in some secret compartments (neurons) of the brain, then it would also be possible to remove them. For thirty years Karl Lashley was trying to do exactly that by removing tiny (and sometimes quite large) sections of rat brains in order to see how this will affect a particular memory of the animal (rats were taught to perform certain tasks). Lashley was in the end (to the rats' relief!) forced to give up: 'I have never been able by any operation on the brain to destroy a specific memory'. The way his operations affected rats was that their performance was poorer on the whole, but they have suffered no specific memory loss. See Orbach, Jack. (1999) 'The Neuropsychological Theories of Lashley and Hebb.' *Psychology* [online], 10 (29). Available at: <http://psychoprints.esc.soton.ac.uk/archive/00000664/index.html> [23 April 2005]. (I am grateful to Miloš Ranković for drawing my attention to Lashley's experiments.)

¹¹⁴ Still and Worton refer here to Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (see Worton, Michael and Still, Judith, eds. *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 10), but T.S. Eliot also talks about the 'simultaneous existence and the 'simultaneous order' of the whole of the literature, i.e. literary tradition. (See Eliot, 'Tradition', p. 74.)

¹¹⁵ Worton and Still, *Intertextuality*, p. 10.

¹¹⁶ As Paul Ricœur asserts: 'free from..., artists must still make themselves free for..'. Ricœur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988, Vol. III, p. 177.

c) *The 'monologic'/'centripetal' tendencies of author-generated texts*

But how does a writer (or for that matter anyone) ever succeed in being original, or achieving a distinct style in the face of the inexhaustible intertextuality or *heteroglossia*¹¹⁷ of the language itself, where each utterance is always but a quotation. Drawing on Bakhtin, Still and Worton offer a clue: '[...] although all discourse is inherently dialogical/intertextual, there are 'monologues' which on one level succeed in repressing dialogism'.¹¹⁸ Such monologues are imposed by what Bakhtin calls unifying or 'centripetal forces', specific socio-historical factors, strong institutions such as the medieval church with its ' "one language of truth," ' ¹¹⁹ dominant groups (e.g. middle class with its 'bourgeois morality'), or individuals (Bakhtin mentions as examples Aristotelian/ Augustan/Cartesian poetics¹²⁰). For Bakhtin, while any discourse is simultaneously dialogic and monologic, centrifugal and centripetal, some discourses can lean more towards one, the others more towards the other of these 'two embattled tendencies in the life of language'.¹²¹ Thus in between these two tendencies a whole scale is formed. When literary genres are put on it, according to Bakhtin, poetry tends towards the monologic/centripetal, while the novel tends towards the dialogic/centrifugal extreme. At the level of individual literary works, the scale becomes more complicated, however. While some poets create dialogic poetry in which there is no one 'lyrical I' that looms large but a multiplicity of voices is identifiable (such is T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, for example), some novelists, on the other hand, create monologic works, as they 'attempt artificially to strip language of others' intentions'.¹²² So, as one reads James's or

¹¹⁷ Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981, p.

¹¹⁸ Worton and Still, *Intertextuality*, p. 4.

¹¹⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 271.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹²² Worton and Still, *Intertextuality*, p. 15.

Hemingway's novels, Scholes and Kellogg observe, one has a distinct feeling that all characters speak 'Jamesian' or 'Hemingwayese'.¹²³ It is important to note that there are no rules as to which of the two extremes of the scale is aesthetically more pleasing – they both have the same potential: while multi-voiced texts gain on diversity of perspectives, those pervaded by a single/dominant voice achieve an engagingly meditative quality that the former often lack.

In the previous chapter I suggested that Bakhtin's dialogic/centrifugal – monologic/centripetal spectrum runs in parallel with Ruth Finnegan's oral-written continuum.¹²⁴ If we put our two kinds of texts on Bakhtin's scale, the post-Gutenbergian, author-generated ones would lean towards the latter, while oral and oral-derived texts would tend towards the former idealised end of Bakhtin's spectrum. On the scale of particular works, however, the picture here is as complex as Bakhtin suggests for the literary texts he considered. We shall soon return to this finer grain of the scale, but let us for the moment consider the 'rougher'.

The way any 'monologue' imposes or communicates itself (i.e. becomes readable) is through the redundancy it is swamped with. Redundancy can be as basic as the imposition of grammatical rules on language, or as elaborate as that present in multimedia political (or football) rallies, for example, where one and the same message is being reiterated in various ways: by the same slogans a multitude of mouths are shouting out, the large letters (coloured so as to sharply contrast the background) in which these slogans are written on peoples' banners, the sheer multitude of people and banners, the codified colouring, the loud music with its regularly recurring rhythms. It is through various such kinds of redundancies that competing interpretational options are effectively being taken away: the more of

¹²³ Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 270.

¹²⁴ See chapter 1, pp. 31–32.

them there is in a text, and at different scales, the clearer the monologue. The argument-driven texts such as this one, commercials and propaganda speeches are likely to exhibit a greater amount of redundancy than one expects to come across in creative writing – especially the kind that places great value on ambiguity. At the same time this does not mean that the redundancy is not present in these texts – without it any communication (be it a telephone conversation, a novel, or a diary one ‘writes for oneself’) would be impossible. In fact, what often happens in such texts is that one kind of redundancy is swapped for another. For example, in the Pavić’s novel we mentioned in the previous chapter, *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the title itself as well as the instructions one receives in the opening chapters suggest to the reader a way of countering the lack of chronological narration aid, chronology being the most common kind of redundancy, or structure, around which texts are organised.

While there are redundancies with which writers can choose whether to invest their texts or not (e.g. writing to fit an already decided upon framework, as in Pavić’s *Dictionary* or in Joyce’s *Ulysses*; or weeding out the unwanted connotations during revisions), there are redundancies that impose themselves at a more basic level where choice does not play a great role – that of communication. Unlike his oral counterpart who always starts from something that is already there in tradition, the writer is faced with the blank page. The page is not blank because the author is a *tabula rasa* – like Tennyson’s *Ulysses* above, s/he is the product of all ‘texts’ (people, things, places, not just writing) that s/he had met – but because, in pursuit of originality, s/he is actively avoiding spaces already occupied, s/he is erasing in order to create the space for her/himself. The pressure (and so ultimately a desire) for originality that post-Gutenberg writers face is a major centripetal/monologising factor itself, as it puts great demands on communication: the more original the

textual universe one is creating, the less one can fall back on the existing conventions, and so, the more redundant support structure needs to be built for the reader to navigate that world, understand/read its originality as originality. What also makes the page blank is the fact that through its puzzling opaqueness the audience cannot be glimpsed, it stays hidden and imagined in its multitude and diversity (even when one means to write for a 'chosen few'), putting the kind of pressure for communication (and so monologisation) that does not affect traditional singers/storytellers. As Walter J. Ong points out:

To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context. The need for this exquisite circumspection makes writing the agonizing work it commonly is.¹²⁵

It is this desire to create a world from scratch and this circumspect anticipation borne by the need to ensure successful communication (you want your originality to be read/understood as originality) that channels the meaning and counters the language's potential for ceaseless signification. Despite the expanding capacity of intertextuality, a literary work as an autonomous (even if not wholly independent) world needs to hold its own for fluent communication to take place, i.e. the text itself needs to a certain extent to contain the material for bridging the potential communication gaps. For example, Leopold Bloom has to develop a relationship with Stephen Dedalus feasible in its own right, whether the reader 'gets' the Odysseus-Telemachus relationship or not, whereas, an epic singer can freely rely on tradition to do that job for him, without spending words on explanations and yet achieving a remarkable opulence and vibrancy of meaning. Modern literary

¹²⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 104.

experiments often attempt the same, pushing their readers as far as they feel they can with unexplained references, with inconsistencies and disparities within the text. However, when communication gaps start looming too large in such written pieces, steps are taken. So, T. S. Eliot furnishes his *Waste Land* with extensive notes. James Joyce does not do this with *Ulysses*; then again, the game there is to realise eventually that some of the references lead nowhere, mean nothing – but that precisely is what *is* communicated, the reader is still being addressed. Ironically perhaps, university lecturers and tutors rarely let students venture into *Ulysses* unarmed with the editions which include explanatory notes the size of an average novel themselves.

However free the play of signification appears to be, and can be, at some stage a writer will, consciously or not, resort to some form of ‘anchorage’ of meaning. Roland Barthes has introduced the term ‘anchorage’ to describe the tactics employed in advertising whereupon an image is accompanied with a caption in order to lead the recipient to a particular interpretation of the image.¹²⁶ But this need not solely concern advertising or the relationship between an image and the text. Something akin to Barthesian anchorage occurs within one and the same text and involves the little clues (reinforcing redundancies) with which authors, deliberately or not, invest different levels of their texts while writing, in order to ensure understanding. For example, the similarity of compulsiveness involved in sex and writing is in Joyce’s *Ulysses* ingrained in different ways. Most apparently, it is indicated by overt references to the fetish-kind of relationship with books on the part of the Dublin literati (they ‘fingerponder nightly each his variorum edition of *The*

¹²⁶ Barthes, Roland. ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ in: *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 32-51.

Taming of the Shrew'),¹²⁷ which is (in a twist of self-irony) mirrored by Joyce's own relationship with *Ulysses* - the book: there is a fair amount of compulsiveness involved in writing an over-seven-hundred-pages-plump book, (to which conscientious editors add a further two hundred pages of explanatory notes), without the slightest intention of writing a chronicle such as *War and Peace* or *Middlemarch*, covering in fact the affairs of but a single day, and all that in quite a condensed form of literary expression. But the sex-writing connection is apparent in less overt ways too. On the phonological plane of the novel this connection is manifested in the obsessive and numerous alliterations (e.g. 'secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark places of both our hearts',¹²⁸ or 'weave, weaver of the wind'¹²⁹); on the morphological level in the paradigmatic probing and exhaustion of grammatical patterns (e.g. 'lips kissed, kissing, kissed',¹³⁰ or 'loveless, landless, wifeless'¹³¹); on the lexical level the language fetishism is exhibited in transvestation of nouns (even adverbs) into verbs: 'wombed',¹³² 'tongued',¹³³ 'almosting',¹³⁴ as well as in the excess of compounds and neologisms (e.g. 'contransmagnificandjewbangtentiality'¹³⁵). As for syntax, one only need turn to 'Penelope', the final chapter created from the climactic build-up of words, with the tantalising, teasing, and delicious refusal to consign them to grammatical pauses, until the whole chapter (and the whole novel) culminate in the orgasmic affirmation '[...] yes I said yes I will Yes'.¹³⁶ Overtly and covertly, and on different textual planes the connection between sexual compulsiveness and writing obsession is being reiterated, 'anchored' into *Ulysses*. It is the success of this kind of

¹²⁷ Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 205.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 732.

anchorage that creates the author, making him/her readable as an overseer/foreseer of the text, despite the centrifugal tendencies of the writing project as a process. This is what simultaneously draws us to the textual universe and what also makes us weary: the hand that leads us makes us secure, but it also points at where to look – this world is not entirely our oyster.

d) The 'dialogic'/'centrifugal' tendencies of distributed traditional texts

Unlike printed texts which have to sustain the bulk of the pressure for communication largely by themselves, the impact of this pressure is in traditional narratives softened because it is spread out, decentered. Some anchorage of meaning is, for example, already intrinsic to the 'somatic' nature of performance – in the case of oral verbal art, we have 'gesture, facial expression, intonation', and in the case of manuscript chirographs 'individualistic layouts, [...] ad hoc decorations',¹³⁷ comments in the margins, etc.¹³⁸ In addition, any particular incarnation of an epic song or a saga (whether in oral or manuscript form) is further relieved of this pressure by its 'silent but ever-present partner'¹³⁹ who is in its stead charged with the responsibility to ensure successful communication. The partner in question is, we have already said, tradition with its anchoring structures that have evolved, rather than being set in place by a central organising principle (a single author). As a result, in each separate rendering, saga writers and epic singers can afford to be extremely economical with explanations (and thus less monologic) while at the same time not risking obscurity.

¹³⁷ Doane, A. N. 'Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts: Editing Old English' in: Clayton, Jay, and Eric Rothstein, eds. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. p. 83.

¹³⁸ Our rather unusual position as readers of traditional texts as they appear in print (and not members of the audience, active partakers in tradition), makes these anchors unavailable to us. This makes the centrifugality of traditional texts even more keenly felt.

¹³⁹ Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 60.

For example, an epic singer can freely afford not to account for placing a certain Marko at the climactic ending of *The Wedding of King Vukašin*, the poem in which (with the exception of the mentioned ending) no Marko features as a character at all. The poem is in fact centred around a brave highlander, duke Momčilo, whose wife Vidosava decides to betray him to the cowardly king Vukašin, swayed by his promises of riches and luxury that await her in his home (velvets and brocade, gold pieces, figs, olives and luscious grapes). After Vukašin's treacherous campaign succeeds and the noble duke is killed, Vukašin has a change of heart, and instead of marrying the unfaithful Vidosava, he decides to listen to his dying enemy's advice and instead marry Momčilo's brave sister and a hearty assistant in the hero's last stand, Jevrosima. The singer ends the poem thus:

King Vukašin looted Momčilo's court
 And then he took Duke Momčilo's sister,
 the duke's sister, lovely Jevrosima.
 He took her to Skadar upon Bojana,
 and married her, he made her his wife.
 With her he had fine and handsome children,
 Marko and Andrija he had,
 and Marko turned out to be like his uncle,
 like his uncle, Momčilo the Duke.

[Краљ похара дворе Момчилове,
 Па он узе сестру Момчилову,
 По имену дилбер Јевросиму,
 Одведе је Скадру на Бојану,
 И вјенча је себи за љубовцу,
 Шњоме лијепи пород изродио,
 Породио Марка и Андрију,
 А Марко се тури на ујака,
 На ујака војводу Момчила.] ¹⁴⁰

What happens here is much more than just a bit of poetic justice bestowed by the singer upon his luckless hero, duke Momčilo. Marko may be a very common Serbian

¹⁴⁰ *Женидба краља Вукашина*, in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 90. My translation relies on that in Holton, Milne and Vasa D. Mihailovich, transl. *Songs of the Serbian People*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

name, but in the epic poetry of Southern Slavs¹⁴¹ there can only be one Marko – the most loved of Serbian heroes, and the only one with a whole cycle of poems dedicated to him, Marko Kraljević, or Prince Marko. By positing this hero at its climax, *The Wedding of King Vukašin* is made into another in the long row of poems celebrating Marko's glory. If only for a brief moment, it is hijacked from Momčilo and Vukašin and turned into an early episode of Marko's epic biography, while at the same time, Marko's future exploits and his troubled relationship with his father are all conjured and instantaneously brought to bear on the heroism of duke Momčilo which we are called upon to enjoy throughout *The Wedding of King Vukašin*. The two powerfully reinforce one another.

Similarly, just after *Gísli saga's* central funeral scene in which Gísli recites his verses, declaring himself Þorgrímr's slayer, we are informed that Þorgrímr's widow and Gísli's sister Þórdís, pregnant at the time, married Þorgrímr's brother Börkr and subsequently gave birth to a baby boy. The boy was initially given the name of his father, but that was later changed into Snorri, due to the child's unruly nature.¹⁴² The boy will not be mentioned again until the very end of the saga, but the modern reader can very easily miss this, since there is no connection whatsoever being made between the two instances. We witness how Þórdís shames and divorces her husband Börkr, subsequently moving to Eyri. Börkr, we are told, 'remained at Helgafell until Snorri the Godi drove him out'¹⁴³ ('er eptir at Helgafelli, til þess er Snorri goði kom, honum á brott'¹⁴⁴). Not 'Snorri the goði, that baby mentioned a while ago, who now

¹⁴¹ Marko was a popular hero throughout the Balkans, sung about in Croatia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, as much as in Serbia.

¹⁴² *Gísli Sursson's Saga* in: Thorsson, Örnólfur, *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Martin S. Regal, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 524. In the footnote on the page 524 the translator of the saga, Martin S. Regal, explains: 'The name Snorri is a twin form of the name Snerrir which means "unruly", "argumentative"'.
¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

¹⁴⁴ *Gísli saga Súrssonar* in: *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Guðni Jónsson and Björn K. Þórólfsson, eds. Íslensk fornrit, 1943, Vol. VI, p. 117.

grew into a powerful chieftain;’ not ‘Snorri, Börkr’s nephew-cum-stepson who always resented his mother’s settling for his unworthy uncle;’ not even simply ‘Pórdís’s son, Snorri the goði’. The saga writer, however, does not share my communicational concerns, indexed so clearly in the series of appositions with which I had to invest each name, in order to make sense of its bearer’s familial relations or the role played in the story. For him, there is no need to anchor Snorri in this way because the tradition takes care of it in its own special way. The initial information about the name change that appears to be a mere curiosity, acts as a catalyst which triggers a vast referential field, expanding the immediate borders of the text at hand. For the audience, Snorri goði is not only a name, but a richly layered reference: Snorri, the hero of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri the shrewd settlement negotiator, Snorri the advisor and protector of Guðrún from *Laxdæla saga*, the calculated and pragmatic Snorri goði who flatly refuses help to the famous Grettir the Strong, yet just enough not to tolerate his son’s sneers at the outlaw’s expense, and so on. Just like with Marko Kraljević and *The Wedding of King Vukašin*, *Gísla saga* becomes a prologue in Snorri’s epic biography, while in turn his stories act as epilogues to the one at hand, extending its borders almost without adding any words.

Within *Gísla saga* itself, the mere mention of Snorri’s name as his mother gets betrothed to Börkr also acts as a flash-forward of sorts, prefiguring the break-up of the marriage that has just taken place and perhaps making the listener/reader mumble to his chin: ‘Oh yeah, just you go on and marry your sister-in-law, but that kid will sure cook your goose’. Or, he might recall other unruly children who also turned into great chieftains, and so mumble something entirely different. Because the tradition is a living, shifting, ever-changing polygon of meanings and not a map that will take you from A to B, or a Morse code in which a particular letter of the alphabet always

corresponds to a particular combination of dashes and dots, the anchorage it provides is itself of a complex sort. It is negotiated by each listener/reader, depending on the extent of his or her immersion in tradition.

By being an object distributed across its various instances of realisation, constantly negotiated between the networks of authors and co-authors in the audience, largely computed (through ‘homing in’ on solutions) rather than communicated (envisaged),¹⁴⁵ a traditional narrative escapes the directedness/monologisation of a single organising principle that pervades texts intended for print. As such, it becomes a more likely venue for disparities, ambiguity, multidimensionality, all of which resonate with our experience of complex reality.

2.3 The Distributed Author’s Emergent Realism

a) The evolutionary aesthetic of traditional narratives

In his *Blind Watchmaker*, Richard Dawkins tells an interesting story about the evolution of bony flatfish. In order to adapt to the living conditions of the ocean floor, at one point of its evolution the flatfish had had to turn from its knife-edge belly on one of its flat sides and ‘allow’ the eye buried in the sand (where it was useless) to ‘travel’ to the top side, both its eyes now looking upwards and its skull all patterned with the signs of that ordeal. Dawkins comments on how these patterns bear witness to the history of gradual change rather than ‘deliberate design:’

No sensible designer would have conceived such a monstrosity if given a free hand to create a flatfish on a clean drawing board. I suspect that most sensible designers would think in terms of

¹⁴⁵ I am indebted to Miloš Ranković for his distinction between communicational (or pragmatic) and computational (or epistemic) investments in an artwork. For more detail see Ranković, Miloš. *Theory and Practice of Handmade Distributed Representation*. PhD. Thesis. University of Leeds, 2005 (forthcoming).

something more like a skate. But evolution never starts from a clean drawing board. It has to start from what is already there.¹⁴⁶

And neither does the tradition start from a clean drawing board. The famous agonies a literary author suffers in front of a clean sheet of paper are not shared by an oral singer, a storyteller, nor even a scribe: the story, we have seen above, always comes before its teller. One can add to or take away from ‘what is already there’, but hardly start from scratch. To be sure, the result of an evolutionary development is not always (not even often) a ‘monstrosity’¹⁴⁷ – after all, the more sensibly looking skates are as much a product of evolution as are the bony flatfish – but neither is it an idealised geometrical form shaped by purpose, efficiency, the ‘sense’. In things shaped by evolution, there always are present remnants of previous stages of development (utilised or not), various appendices and inactive growths, more or less perceptible blemishes and asymmetries. This is, we have discussed in the previous chapter, how natural, ‘real’, feels. Even we, humans, whose ideal of beauty is inextricably tied to symmetry¹⁴⁸ are weary of what we perceive as perfect (geometrical) symmetry and are likely to dismiss it as artificial, or tampered with. So, ‘too symmetrical’ a face strikes us as ‘plastic’ – whether plastic as in a doll/mannequin, or plastic as in plastic surgery, either way the association is with some sort of pretence, with something human-made or manipulated.

Being products of the similar evolutionary dynamics as animals with their appendices and asymmetries (or wild meadows sprinkled with their weeds), traditional narratives also share some of the above described texture of reality, in that

¹⁴⁶ Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 92.

¹⁴⁷ Of course, it is only from the aspect of human aesthetics (the aesthetics which favours symmetry) that the bony flatfish appears monstrous. Its extreme look (from our perspective) is in fact one of the reasons Dawkins chooses it as an illustration of the gradual, computational nature of an evolutionary change rather than the purposeful, human kind of intervention that envisages a solution according to the previously identified problem. The other reason is the fact that the flatfish is a rare case of evolution ‘caught’ in such a visibly transitional state.

¹⁴⁸ We are not alone in this preference. Most other species (though perhaps not the flatfish!) share the love of symmetry as it usually signals good health in a potential mate.

they are made up of various patterns (irregular as much as regular) accreted through time, revealing a motley of attitudes and perspectives (complementary as well as contradictory) on past characters and events. We shall take a closer look at these patterns of emergent realism in the following two chapters, but first we must address an important question that arises from the argument so far.

b) Traditional narratives = masterpieces of emergent realism?

If all traditional narratives are distributed objects, and if their medium is characterised by evolutionary dynamics (distributed author), is the kind of representational complexity (emergent realism) that we find in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics always a necessary outcome? If so, why are not all traditional narratives as readily dubbed great masterpieces of realism as (we have seen in the previous chapter) our two literatures are?

Although all traditional narratives are inherently distributed, they can be, and in fact often are, monologised, with their distributedness (centrifugality) compromised by the Bakhtinian centripetal forces that we mentioned earlier – centralised state, court, Church. These forces that dominated most of medieval Europe tend to assume the role of an organising principle (an overseer), and they acted not only upon the cultures with highly developed literacy (e.g. that of medieval France), but also those where oral poetry was the predominant form of expression. For example, Alois Schmaus points out that Bosnian Muslim feudal aristocracy (especially that based on the ‘Military Border’ with Austro-Hungarian Empire) took an active interest in the development of oral epic, imposing its own outlook and taste through censure and reward:

Singers’ practice acquires a certain quasi-courtly note, and at the same time, there appears a regulative of artistic taste in the sense of

feudal class censure. Noble beys perform as singers themselves, invite best singers to be their guests over prolonged periods of time and dismiss them later, richly rewarded.¹⁴⁹

The famous (but by no means a solitary or rare¹⁵⁰) example is that of the Bosnian bey, singer, patron and critic of oral epic, Huseinbeg Kulenović Staroselac, who often invited singers to be his guests (sometimes two at a time, keeping them for up to six months), 'listened and corrected their songs, argued with them about them [the songs], or sung them his own, and then dismissed them with lavish gifts'.¹⁵¹

Considered as the Muslim singers' 'general director',¹⁵² Mathias Murko notes that Staroselac 'exerted a strong influence upon the folk epic as known to us'.¹⁵³ The social (but also financial¹⁵⁴) prestige that went with the label of *begovski pevač* ('beys' singer', the one employed by beys to entertain) motivated other singers to adjust to a particular taste and the particular (feudal) ideology, leading to homogenisation (monologisation) of oral epic singing.

One finds a similar kind of ideological cleansing of oral heteroglossia in the oral-derived French epic, *La Chanson de Roland*. Indeed, against the political and religious backdrop of the Crusades, it is very difficult to imagine a distinguished knight, or a cleric, rewarding a performance of *Roland* with a more sympathetic portrayal of the Saracens. They are even less likely to part with a small fortune so

¹⁴⁹ 'Певачка пракса добија неку квази-дворску ноту, уједно се појављује један регулатив уметничког укуса у смислу племићко-сталешке цензуре. Отмени бегови сами иступају као певачи, позивају најбоље певаче на дуже време у госте и отпуштају их богато награђене.' See Шмаус, Алојз. 'Студије о крајинској епици.' in Недић, Владан.ed. *Народна књижевност*. Београд: Нолит, 1966, pp. 278-279.

¹⁵⁰ See Шмаус, 'Студије', p. 279.

¹⁵¹ '[Староселац је] слушао и поправљао њихове песме, препирао се такође с њима због њих (песама), или певао им своје, и отпуштао их затим са богатим поклонима.' Murko, Mathias in Шмаус, 'Студије', p. 279.

¹⁵² A closer translation of the original ('Директор најглавнији') would be 'the most general Director'. Murko in Шмаус, 'Студије', p. 280.

¹⁵³ '[Узором мецене је био Староселац "који је] извршио јак утицај на познату нам народну епику"'. Murko in Шмаус, 'Студије', p. 279.

¹⁵⁴ Although even the 'beys' singers' could (like their Christian counterparts) not be considered professional in the strict sense of the word, Schmaus notes, however, that 'often the reward in kind and money was still their main source of earning ('често је награда у натури и новцу ипак њихов главни извор прихода')'. Шмаус, 'Студије', p. 280.

that such text should be preserved in manuscripts. Too much is invested in the Crusading campaign for it to be jeopardised by ambiguity. Furthermore, cultures with strong secular and clerical institutions like medieval France will have more quickly interiorised writing¹⁵⁵ than the cultures that were without them, and the narratives thus produced (even if oral-derived) would sooner start showing signs of communicational pressure, just as the authored-generated texts-universes do. Consequently, these texts become less traditional, and by the same token, less centrifugal.

In stark contrast to these cases, the peculiar weakness in medieval Iceland and nineteenth-century Serbia of the centripetal forces that direct art production¹⁵⁶ corroborates the sagas' and epics' distributed nature. To be sure, members of the chieftain class in Iceland were most often among those who commissioned (and quite possibly among those who wrote¹⁵⁷) the sagas. Unlike Bosnian beys or French knights, however, Icelandic chieftains had no central power (a sultan or a king) to govern them and define them, unify them behind the common purpose. Besides, at the time the immanent saga wholes started being set in writing, Icelandic chieftains were warring among themselves and hence had no coherent ideology to impose. More importantly, however, chieftains were hardly the only social group interested in (and able to finance) saga production. The sagas were also being written at the farmsteads of rich farmers and in monasteries. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen points out:

Iceland had *no single dominant cultural centre*, and education and the work of authorship and copying were carried on in many places in the country, at chieftain's farms, in monasteries and at Episcopal seats. Books were undoubtedly written at all these places and the

¹⁵⁵ See p. 89 above.

¹⁵⁶ For a more thorough discussion of our two literatures' socio-political milieus see chapter 1, pp. 12-29.

¹⁵⁷ See chapter 1, p. 34.

heterogeneous seats of learning, with both ecclesiastical and secular aims and interests, promoted the varied nature of literature. *No single ruler or institution was able to monopolize or dominate the writing process [...]*.¹⁵⁸

As a result, unlike the majority of European epics, saga literature could hardly develop in terms of becoming ‘a manifestation of the aristocratic spirit’.¹⁵⁹ Heroes in the sagas are not only eminent chieftains, but also farmers, lawmen and outlaws alike (e.g. Grettir the Strong, Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, the wise Njáll), and there are sagas (*Bandamanna* is the most famous example) in which chieftains fail miserably in terms of heroism, generosity and wisdom, all the qualities with which ‘good men’ are supposed to be graced. Rather than for a leisurely, aristocratic audience, Icelanders, Jane Smiley notes, ‘wrote for each other’,¹⁶⁰ and so did the Serbs sing for each other.

After the Turkish conquest and the fall of the last ruling dynasty in 1458, the Brankovićs, Serbian feudal aristocracy was either wiped out, assimilated in emigration or converted to Islam. There were, therefore, no upper classes left that would support and direct the production of Christian oral epic, as we have seen was the case with the epic of the Islamised Slavs in Bosnia. Inasmuch as we can talk about the censure of the Ottoman ruling class, it was only indirect in a sense that no one in their right mind would want to jar the sensibilities of the overlords openly by singing before them about the military and moral victories of Serbian lords or outlaws over the Turks. (This, of course, unless one is to be executed anyway, as was the case with Višnjić’s uncle who is known to have sung on his way to the gallows of

¹⁵⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. ‘Social Institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and their relations to literary production’ in: Clunies Ross, Margaret. *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 25-26, my emphasis.

¹⁵⁹ Hatto, Arthur T. ‘Medieval German’ in: Hatto, Arthur T., ed. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*. London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1980, p. 166.

¹⁶⁰ Smiley, Jane. ‘Preface’ in: Thorsson, Örnólfur, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. London: The Penguin Press, 2000, p. x.

Zvornik.¹⁶¹) However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the way Ottomans ruled their subjects was to give them a fair amount of independence, residing in towns for strategic and administrative reasons while their Christian subjects mainly inhabited villages. All this meant that Christian epics were mostly cultivated ‘in the milieu of the family’¹⁶² and were also briefer than the ornate and eventful Muslim counterparts, most often concentrating on one or two episodes of some immanent whole at the time. This multi-local, decentralised production was extremely supportive of the centrifugality of the medium.

Of some consistent and organised form of patronage of Serbian epics there can be no mention either. There is indeed a rather famous (if isolated) case involving one of the nineteenth-century leaders of the First Serbian Uprising, Stojan Čupić who had given the singer Filip Višjić a white horse as a reward for *The Battle of Salaš*.¹⁶³ The song celebrates the heroism of Čupić, or as known in the epic songs – *zmaj od Noćaja* (‘the dragon of Noćaj’) and that of his outnumbered men while defending the district of Mačva against a stronger enemy. Even if cases such as this one were not an exception but rather the rule, it would still be very hard for the leaders to impose some unified ideology as they were a rather eclectic bunch, comprising village elders and chiefs, traders, priests, peasants and outlaws, and so not that much different from the make-up of their soldiery. And neither were the leaders unified in their purpose or their goals: what started as a local rebellion against the tyrannical dahijas of the Belgrade Pashalik and with no objection from the Sultan, had soon spilled over into an all-out war for liberation, only to be crashed precisely for the lack of a unified purpose and planning, as well as the internal power-struggles that inevitably ensued.

¹⁶¹ See Недић, *Вукови певачи*, p. 42.

¹⁶² Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 97.

¹⁶³ See Koljević, Svetozar. *The Epic in the Making*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 307.

Had Čupić considered himself as being distinctly separated from his soldiers by class, and had he the time and the leisure that comes with higher status to contemplate various implications of Višnjić's lines (as we have seen Huseinbeg Kulenović Staroselac had done with his singers), it would be hard to imagine that he would let Višnjić proceed beyond the opening scene, let alone give him a horse. Namely, as Čupić drinks wine with his two blood brothers at the beginning of *The Battle of Salaš*, he is interrupted by a poor young sentry 'with no shoes, and no long rifle' ('Без обуће и без дуге пушке'¹⁶⁴) who instead of a greeting, chides the three leaders for feasting and enjoying themselves, while their people are dying near by:

Who supplied the horses for you?
 Who cut the material for your fine clothes?
 Who forged your arms,
 But the mere poor rayah¹⁶⁵?
 You then set the rayah at odds with the Turks,
 And now you betrayed it to the Turks;
 What are you doing? Let God smite you!
 What are you doing, since you are not fighting?

[Тко је вама коње набавио?
 Тко је вама чоху порезао?
 Тко ли вам је поков'о оружје?
 Разма једна сиротиња раја,
 Пак с Турцима рају завадисте,
 И Турцима сада издадосте;
 Што чините? да вас Бог убије!
 Што чините, јер се не бијете?]¹⁶⁶

Čupić and his friends will soon do enough to prove that they did not forget about their people's struggle. Still, had the leaders had enough time to establish themselves as a new nobility¹⁶⁷ one would hardly expect to find such an open and incredibly

¹⁶⁴ Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 132.

¹⁶⁵ A derogatory term used by the Turkish overlords to describe their subjects. This term of disparagement has grown to become a term of defiance for the subjugated people during the rebellion, much like some African Americans today address each other as 'nigger' as a matter of pride and in recognition of mutual (and successful) struggle.

¹⁶⁶ Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 133.

¹⁶⁷ As the families Obrenović and Karađorđević eventually emerged as rulers and started forming a modern state, that also marked the end of the oral culture.

harsh critique preserved: in time, the sentry's words would inevitably have to lose some of their edge.

With no centripetal/monologising factors sufficiently strong to impose themselves, the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry appear as little else than indexes of their own coming into being, preserving, meshing and contrasting the old and the new, the general and the more idiosyncratic perspectives on the past events and characters. In so doing they fail to arouse in the recipient the feeling of being addressed and possibly manipulated by an all-encompassing organising authority. In other words, the medium is a realist's dream come true: without the pressure of having to deal with the authority of the author (either to reveal it or conceal it), the characters and events in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems appear unmediated, unrepresented – they simply emerge.

III

The Emergent Past in the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry

3.1 Just How Golden Are the 'Golden Ages' of the *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme*?

a) *Trouble in paradise*

Considering the importance of the Settlement period to the sagas of Icelanders, Gunnar Karlsson remarks: '[...] it has been argued convincingly that all ethnic groups find a golden age in their past if they need it in the present'.¹ The ambience of *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme* is, as in other stories of community origins, permeated by nostalgia, yet the picture of the past that emerges from our two literatures escapes the determinism of the golden age narrative framework.² There is no clear linear progression from the initial bliss and innocence, followed by a fatal hubris and descent into a dark age with the promise of a possible rebirth, that Anthony Smith suggests, is played out in all myths of ethnic origins. Taking queue from Minogue, Smith argues that

these myths resemble the motif of the Sleeping Beauty, pricked by the external forces of evil and put to sleep until the nationalist dawn arrives to restore the community to its true self in a new 'golden age'.³

In the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry, it is precisely the beauty of the Beauty that comes under scrutiny, as the external evil prick is merely one that is the

¹ Gunnar Karlsson. *Iceland's 1100 years: The History of a Marginal Society*. London: Hurst & Company, 2000, p. 50.

² For example, as delineated by Smith, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1986, pp. 191-196.

³ Smith, *The Ethnic Origin*, p. 191.

most visible on this handsome but already corrupted, inwardly scarred body. And no one is lulled into a soothing stupor of amnesia.

Indeed, the sagas cast a long yearning gaze at Iceland's beginnings, the time when noble pioneers, unwilling to sacrifice their freedom to a tyrant, came to claim an uninhabited land, a little piece of paradise:

He [Skallagrim] had a farmstead built on Alftanes and ran another farm there, and rowed out from it to catch fish and cull seals and gather eggs, all of which were in great abundance. There was plenty of driftwood to take back to his farm. Whales beached, too, in great numbers, and there was wildlife for the taking at this hunting post; the animals were not used to men and would never flee. He owned a third farm by the sea on the western part of Myrar. This was an even better place to gather driftwood, and he planted crops there and named it Akrrar (Fields). The islands offshore were called Hvalseyar (Whale islands), because whales congregated there. Skallagrim also sent his men upriver to catch salmon.⁴

[hann [Skalla-Grímr] lét gera bæ á Álptanesi ok átti þar bú annat, lét þaðan sækja útróðra ok selveiðar ok eggver, er þá váru gnóg föng þau öll, svá rekavið at láta at sér flytja. Hvalkvámur váru þá ok miklar, ok skjóta mátti sem vildi; allt var þar þá kyrrt í veiðistöð, er þat var óvant manni. It þriðja bú átti hann við sjóinn á vestanverðum Mýrum var þar enn betr komit at sitja fyrir rekum, ok þar lét hann hafa sæði ok kalla at Ökrum. Eyjar lágu þar út fyrir, er hvalr fannsk í, ok kölluðu þeir Hvalseyjar. Skalla-Grímr hafði ok menn sína uppi við laxárnar til veiða;]⁵

People like Skalla-Grímr go on to build a state of free farmers who meet as equals at their assemblies to resolve their differences and conflicts. And here would be the end of a fairy-tale, or an Arcadian idyll, for there would be no sagas. In the sagas, a conflict (not least over a beached whale, or driftwood that will rapidly grow scarcer) will indeed eventually be settled at the assembly, but not in the first instance, often not before it escalates into a full-blown disaster and not until lives are lost and the honour and 'good will' of people heavily tested. In the sagas, tyrants are never

⁴ *Egil's Saga* in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Bernard Scudder, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 48.

⁵ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Sigurður Nordal, ed. Íslensk fornrit, 1933, Vol. II, p. 75.

simply tyrants and victims of tyrants are as much victims of their own social ambition, or their character; and even the 'promised land' is sometimes seen as a poor exchange for the old country, as a 'cold-backed mountain' ('Kaldbakr')⁶ or even 'that fishing camp' ('þá veiðistöð').⁷

The origin to which Serbian epic poems turn in their longing is the heyday of the Serbian Empire. The gaze of the singer seems bedazzled by the medieval splendour: churches with their foundations laid in 'pure silk and costly scarlet cloth' ('свила и скерлет');⁸ golden goblets, rings, and crowns studded with jewels so precious that they 'shine at night as the sun shines on days' ('сјаје ноћом, како дањом сунце');⁹ lords in their magnificent clothes and golden war-gear and ladies bedecked in finery; a Tsar capable of connecting three hundred wells into a single stream, leading the stream up the mountain Šara and then down all the way to Egypt where it would flow into three golden cups for the poor to drink. Yet this gaze is not mesmerised into a static adoration of the past. It moves on to the images of churches desecrated precisely for their splendour, stripped of their bronze bells to be made into the enemy's guns and of their lead roofs which are to become the ammunition; of their jewels and gold which are to adorn the necks of the enemy's wives. It hovers over lords with their golden knives at each other's throats; over ladies who soil the hems of their dresses and their richly embroidered sleeves in blood, turning the bodies of the dead and wounded in search of their kinsmen and betrothed; mothers

⁶ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* in: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Bernard Scudder, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. II, p. 58; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Guðni Jónsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit 1936, Vol. VII, p. 22.

⁷ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* in: Örnólfur Thorsson, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, p. 277; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 5.

⁸ *The Fall of the Serbian Empire* in: Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, transl. *Songs of the Serbian People*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997, p. 148; *Пропаст царства српскога* in: Караџић, Вук Стефановић, ed. *Српске народне пјесме*, Београд: Просвета, 1976, Vol. II, p. 214.

⁹ *The Building of Ravanica* in: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 103; *Зиданье Раванице* in: Караџић, Vol II, p. 147.

recognising severed hands of their sons by the precious rings on them. And Tsar Dušan the Mighty, the creator and the symbol of Serbia's power and prosperity, completes the impossible task not to win a princess from a distant land, but to marry his own sister who thought the task up in a desperate attempt to escape a sacrilegious marriage – tragic on a personal level because incestuous, and tragic on the social scale because imperial and therefore directly affecting the people.

It may not be far off the mark if the Settlement of Iceland or Tsar Dušan's Serbia were to be viewed as golden ages, inasmuch as the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems, like any other inquiries into the past, are products of humans, the 'story-telling animals', who, in search of comforts and answers, reach for 'History itself, the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark'.¹⁰ As Smith explains:

Nostalgia is so often linked with utopia; our blueprints for the future are inevitably derived from our experiences of our pasts, and as we travel forward, we do so looking backwards to a past that seems knowable and intelligible and which alone can 'make sense' of a future that is forever neither.¹¹

However, the sagas and Serbian epics would qualify only as a very peculiar sort of golden age stories, since the comfort of a dream and wish-fulfilment, the utopia, is not all they offer. The pasts we encounter in them are intricate blends of glory and misery, fusions of the seeds of prosperity and seeds of destruction. If this suggests anything about the desires¹² of the saga writers and epic singers of Serbia, then it is a need not to escape the present (by either invoking the former vigour and unsullied magnificence of the 'Sleeping Beauty', or joining her in her slumber and dreaming of a 'new dawn'), but rather to feel it acutely, to understand and hence hope. The

¹⁰ Swift, Graham. *Waterland*. London: Heinemann, 1983, p.53.

¹¹ Smith, *The Ethnic Origin*, p. 177.

¹² And as we have seen Smith and Karlsson (but also many others) argue, any recourse to the past necessarily entails desires.

complex makeup of the past – these lively contradictions, the variety of perspectives on the past which compete against or modulate one another in the two literatures provide a good polygon to test the notions of emergent realism and distributed authorship, as discussed in previous chapters. But, just as before any other journey, a path needs to be chosen first.

b) Pathways to the past

In saga scholarship it was Einar Ól. Sveinsson¹³ (henceforth referred to as E.Ó.S.) who suggested that the age of Settlement, the age being described in the sagas, cannot be understood as an entity separate from the age of the Sturlungs, the one in which the describing is done. Around the same time as E.Ó.S., Vladan Nedić¹⁴ establishes a similar connection between medieval Serbia and the First Serbian Uprising. Both scholars engage in drawing specific links: E.Ó.S. famously associates the burning of Njáll's farm (*Njáls saga*) with the burning of the Flugumýrr farm in the thirteenth century, while Nedić identifies the banner of Boško Jugović (*Цар Лазар и царица Милица*) with one that would have been used by nineteenth-century Serbian rebels rather than medieval Kosovo warriors. They also see the contemporary internal quarrels (of the Sturlungs in E.Ó.S.'s, and of the rebel leaders in Nedić's case) and their disastrous effects reflected in the feuding of the sagas' chieftains and the strife among the Serbian medieval lords, which (according to the poems) led to the defeat at Kosovo. The ideas that the age of Settlement, as it appears in the sagas, and medieval Serbia as it appears in the epic songs recorded in the nineteenth-century, are constructs of the Sturlung Age/First Serbian Uprising, or perhaps dialogues of the latter with the former times, have since had a great impact

¹³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1953.

¹⁴ Недић, Владан. *Вукови певачи*. Београд: Рад, 1990.

on the scholarships of saga and Serbian epic respectively. What has certainly changed since E.Ó.S. and Nedić is the shift of emphasis from the sagas/Serbian epics as more or less direct reflections of socio-historical conditions to socio-historical conditions not determining but rather facilitating a space within which it is possible for such literature to come into being. E.Ó.S.'s recognition that the sagas are most telling of times they were composed in and a relatively recent shift of interest from the political to social history has, as Bjarne Fidjestøl notes, again given the sagas 'a chance to be counted sources of history', since they are 'a study of how a society operated without central power'.¹⁵ Thus the sagas, Serbian epics (as well as other traditional literatures) are more and more considered as 'ethnographic documents',¹⁶ 'a medium of cultural memory',¹⁷ 'the historical memory',¹⁸ 'the epic remembrance of history',¹⁹ or as what the French Annales School²⁰ identified as *longue durée* histories (i.e. 'histories of long duration'). As such, they do not necessarily commit themselves to 'facts' about past events; rather, they are fateful to the impact that these events had on a community, they document 'coming to terms with the past',²¹ which is also coming to terms with the present.

¹⁵ Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 'Icelandic Sagas and Poems on Princes. Literature and Society in Archaic West Norse Culture' in: Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, eds. *Selected Papers*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1997, p. 250.

¹⁶ Whaley, Diana. 'A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland' in: Margaret Clunies Ross, ed. *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 166; also see Jesse Byock. *Viking Age Iceland*. London: Penguin, 2001, p. 21.

¹⁷ Glauser, Jürg. 'Sagas of the Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*) and *Þættir* as a Literary Representation of a New Social Space' in: Clunies-Ross, *Old Icelandic*, p. 211.

¹⁸ Deretić, Jovan. 'Poems and events: historicity in Serbo-Croat oral epics' in: Branch, Michael and Celia Hawkesworth, eds. *The Uses of Tradition: a Comparative Enquiry into the Nature, Uses and Functions of Oral Poetry in the Balkans, the Baltic, and Africa*. London: Quorn Selective Repro Ltd., 1994, p. 93.

¹⁹ 'Епско памћење историје'. See: Деретић, Јован. *Српска народна епика*. Београд: Филип Вишњић, 2000, p. 71.

²⁰ Before any such thing as 'cultural history' existed, a group of historians that gathered around the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (c.1929-1994) tried to raise an awareness of the role that large scale social, cultural and economic factors play in the production of historical accounts. One of the School's most prominent members was Fernand Braudel. (See for example: Braudel, Fernand. *On History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.)

²¹ Glauser, 'Sagas', p. 204. For a similar perspective concerning Serbian epics, see: Mihaljčić, Rade. *The Battle of Kosovo: In History and in Popular Tradition*. Beograd: BIGZ, 1989; and Матишки,

At the same time, both E.Ó.S. and Nedić move away from the straightforward, one-to-one links of the kind described above, and make more general associations between ‘the flavour of the times’ in which the sagas and Serbian epics came to be written down and the particular kind of creativity that is to be found in them. E.Ó.S., for example, draws a connection between the turbulent times of the Sturlung age whose ‘shifting winds’ he deems responsible for giving people ‘a kind of cold and sceptical power of observation’ with ‘a curious sobriety and realism’²² in the sagas:

[The] Sturlung Age was anything but of a piece. Lies and virtues existed side by side, and wherever the vices seemed about to prevail absolutely, words or incidents could crop up to show the opposite. And in this changeable atmosphere grew the masterpieces of the age, the Sagas of Icelanders.²³

Similarly, Vladan Nedić notices that, for all their enchantment with medieval splendours, the nineteenth-century singers still manage to rise above what he calls ‘historical partiality’ (‘историјска пристрасност’),²⁴ and that this is detectable in their developing sense of irony. This sense he associates with the disenchantment that the ‘shifting winds’ (to borrow Sveinsson’s phrase since it fits so well in this context too) of the First Uprising brought in their wake. Analysing the skills of the singer who (most likely thanks to his audacity and for his own protection) remains known as merely ‘A peasant from the Rudnik region’ (‘сељак из Рудничке нахије’), Nedić comments:

If the forbears of our singer had, depicting the old times – the nobility and the rulers – already started to bring in the sharp cuts of irony, he has, it appears, significantly accentuated these features.

Миодраг: *Поновнице: типови односа усмене и писане књижевности*, Нови Сад: Књижевна заједница Новог Сада, 1989.

²² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Age*, p. 75.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁴ Недић, *Вукови певачи*, p. 122.

His great experience of the Uprising must have prompted him to do this.²⁵

More recently, Torfi Tulinius points to ‘uncertain identities’²⁶ and ‘questioning of the ideological foundations of the social system’²⁷ in the thirteenth-century Iceland as contributing factors to the appeal of saga literature in particular, and sees them further as common features of ‘sophisticated fiction in the Western tradition’²⁸ in general. Miodrag Maticki similarly associates the First Serbian Uprising with the new wave of epic singing which has injected into the old material, ‘material with heroic-mythic markers’, the vigour of ‘a humorous stripping of pathos’.²⁹ Admittedly, Maticki’s association is more causal in character than Tulinius’s, and he does not concentrate specifically on the ‘uncertain identities’ and ‘questioning’ *per se*, although we may argue these are implicitly present in the whole notion of the Uprising: what started as a relatively local rebellion has, with its rapid military success, quickly outgrown its initial purposes and turned into an all-out war for liberation, with the rebel leaders as unprepared as ambitious, and the hopes of people (singers among them) now raised, now dashed. ‘Uncertain identities’ and ‘questioning’ are never far off situations like this, not simply turbulent,³⁰ violent, but volatile, situations which yield a certain amount of organisational, structural vacuum, situations unresolved, poised, ridden with Bakhtin’s ‘centrifugal forces’,

²⁵ ‘Ако су претходници нашег певача, сликајући стара времена – властелу и владаре – већ били почели да уносе оштрице ироније, он је по свој прилици знатно појачао такве појединости. На то га је морало подстаћи велико искуство устанка.’ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁶ Torfi H. Tulinius. ‘The Matter of the North: Fiction and Uncertain Identities in Thirteenth-Century Iceland’ in: Cluniness Ross, *Old Icelandic*, p. 242.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁹ Матицки, *Поновнице*, p. 27. (For the full quote in Serbian, see chapter 1, p. 52, note 218.)

³⁰ Indeed, if we look at the *Song of Roland*, written against the political backdrop of the Crusades, we will notice that there is no turbulence lacking, but the identities are nevertheless happily resolved: Christians are good, and (apart from Ganelon, the singled-out villain) united in their common cause; Saracens, on the other hand, are bad, and even they ‘know’ and accept it.

In Tulinius's article, 'uncertain identities' and the 'questioning of the ideological foundations of the social system' are treated as traits of both a society in crisis (or transition) and sophisticated fiction. When the focus is thus placed on the historical and social circumstances of the thirteenth-century Iceland/nineteenth-century Serbia, the picture that emerges is that of the societies in turmoil generating a new or appropriating the old venue (the sagas/epic poems) in which they try to work themselves out, exploring different pathways and leaving them visible, which, in turn, has an aesthetic effect. Torfi Tulinius (and Maticki to a certain extent) argue from this perspective very persuasively. This inquiry, on the other hand, while latching onto the aforementioned notions of 'uncertainty', 'questioning', 'shifting winds', 'changeable atmosphere', treats them from a primarily aesthetic point of view. In other words, the focus of this study is placed on the opposite end: instead of asking what is it in the socio-historical circumstances that supports the representational complexity of our two literature, the question posed here is: what is it in the literary texture of the sagas/Serbian epics that brings the past forth so vividly?

I shall approach the question on two levels and, therefore, in two sections. The first one deals with the saga authors' and Serbian epic singers' explicit concern with the veracity of the material related as well as their engagement with a variety of authenticating devices. By questioning and authenticating the material, the saga authors/epic singers attempt to counter some of their audience's doubts even before they arise, or at least channel them away, fizzle them out. It is in this conscious pursuit (if not the methods) of objectivity, 'the truth', 'l'effet de réel', that the saga authors and epic singers come the closest to the kind of representational (envisaged, rather than emergent) realism in literature that we discussed in chapter one, and are

perhaps also evocative of historians through their employment of the rhetoric that involves authentication by questioning, relativisation, uncertainty. Affirming an account, or voicing concerns about its veracity, requires that the saga author/epic singer 'take a step back' from the immediate flow of the story, and while the first section is dedicated to these instances, the second explores the ways the sagas/Serbian epics achieve credibility precisely through this flow, within the very fabric of the story. Thus the second section is concerned with the effects of our two literatures' distributed authorship (the emergent realism), the complexity and ambiguity of past events that transpire as the variety of perspectives accrued through time, each valid in its own right, meet, compete, negotiate. The interplay of these perspectives, the refusal to settle for definitive explanations, gives past events in the sagas and Serbian epics appearance of processes: they come across as animated, 'real'. It is through this richness of both the texture and framing, I shall argue, that a compelling past emerges from the two literatures.

3.2 Realism of Authentication, Questioning and Uncertainty

As discussed in previous chapters, epic singers and storytellers in oral societies (as well as the saga writers and scribes), did not consider themselves the authors of their stories but rather the custodians of tradition, and even when they produce a new work, they would sooner say that they heard it from others, than own up to it.³¹ This is not done out of some misguided sense of modesty, but because the gesture is a powerful authenticating device on the one hand, while on the other it suggests the poem's aesthetic merit. Since, generally, epic singers want to be taken seriously

³¹ See chapter 2, note 24, p. 89.

(after all, they are relating ‘a tale of the tribe’), they call upon the authority of the collective to assert the veracity of their account. In addition, as Radmila Pešić rightly points out, ‘a statement that the song had been heard from another affirms its value’.³² Only a worthwhile song survives the censure of the collective, so the statement that it has been passed on to the singer also acts as a kind of advertisement: the audience is led to anticipate some good entertainment.

The writers of literate epics adopt and employ the evasion of responsibility in much the same fashion as their illiterate counterparts: *Beowulf*’s creator, for example, begins by announcing that the story is going to be about ‘the Spear-Danes’ and their princes of whose heroic campaigns ‘we have *heard*’.³³ Similarly, the author of *The Nibelungenlied* comments: ‘We have *heard* tales told of how knights wore costly raiment, raven black of hue’. And later, as these knights’ expedition to Iceland proves successful, Princess Brunhild is won and brought to Worms, a feast is given in her honour so splendid that the benches there were all, the impressed writer informs us, ‘set with vitaille, *as we are told*’.³⁴ Unusually for medieval literature, the author of *Roland* proudly states his name at the end of the epic, even dwells on himself slightly, giving us some notion of his age, yet his ownership of the text is not made unconditional: ‘So it is Tuoldus *heard*/ This history, and so it ends/ For he himself is near his end’.³⁵

While in the examples cited above the emphasis is either on the bard *hearing* or being *told* a story, the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry go a step further. In them, instances in which the singers/saga writers ‘step out’ of their stories in order to affirm their veracity are, although by no means profuse, far more

³² Пешић, Радмила. ‘Владан Недић о Вуковим певачима’ in: Недић, Владан: *Вукови певачи*. p. 13. Pešić draws here on Bogatirev and Jakobson.

³³ *Beowulf*. Seamus Heaney, transl. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002, p. 3.

³⁴ *Nibelungenlied*. Arthur T. Hatto, transl. London: Penguin, 1969. pp. 57 and 85.

³⁵ *The Song of Roland*. C. H. Sisson, transl. Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1983, p. 135.

frequent, elaborate and varied. The existence of such instances would suggest that the issue of truthfulness was more important to the two literatures - they are more than mere stylistic devices. What is even more surprising is that the singers/saga writers do not always come across as unquestioning transmitters of ancient knowledge, but occasionally reflect on their material (a rudimentary critical consideration or even outright concerns about the veracity of the story related are put forward). Occasionally they also supplement their material using contemporary knowledge of the state of affairs in order to verify a past event. The ways in which the validating is executed in Serbian epics differ from those employed by the sagas and that is why I shall consider each in turn. The effect, however, is quite similar: both literatures create a strong illusion of objectivity, or as J.B. Hainsworth would say: 'that verisimilitude that in poetry passes for truth'.³⁶

3.2.1. Serbian epic poetry

a) The parameters

Before we consider the examples in Serbian epic poetry, it seems wise to draw attention to Marija Kleut who warns us against falling prey to our habits as the consumers of the written word and treating these instances as though they occupy the same semantic level as the rest of the story. Instead, Kleut iterates that they are marked by the special circumstance of oral performance:

The address to the audience (most often in the second person plural) is an integral part of the oral performance. It is made possible and is motivated by the oral presentation and it is a real address, not a fictive one as in written literature.³⁷

³⁶ Hainsworth, *The Idea*, p.143.

³⁷ Kleut, Marija. 'Concluding Formulas of Audience Address in Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic.' *Oral Tradition*, 1991, 6, (2-3), p. 266.

Kleut's stance is informed by her examination of a sizeable body of manuscripts which show that the collectors of epic poems often decided to leave these addresses out of the printed versions. Her explanation of their decision is that, on the one hand, these addresses are disconnected from the main body and 'do not give the impression of being organic parts of the poem',³⁸ and on the other hand, 'when the oral poem appears in print, the address to the listeners loses its function or, at least, its function is significantly altered'.³⁹ In other words, the collectors have found these parts of the poem too dependent on the specific circumstances of a particular performance to include them. But this is precisely what makes them relevant to this inquiry.

Another possible objection to a serious regard of the addresses to audience is that they occur in the opening and, more frequently, the concluding lines of a poem, usually as formulae. Surely, the mechanical use of these lines should render them meaningless. Again, what needs to be iterated (and what I have tried to do in previous chapters), is the fact that in oral verbal art, a line⁴⁰ becomes a formula not for the convenience of the singer who can easily remember it and apply it in a number of poems (this is a useful consequence, not the cause), but primarily because it successfully caters for the tastes and concerns of the audience, because it works when applied in an appropriate context. To all these issues we need to be sensitive when approaching the works originally intended for oral performance.

b) Grave doubts and merry dismissals

Having set the conditions for observation, let us now look more closely at the actual instances in which the singer addresses his/her audience with a comment on his/her material. Casting legendary and folk-tale material into the form of an epic poem, the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ Also a group of lines, thematic blocks, a phrase, etc.

singer of *The Serpent Bridegroom* (*Змија Младожења*) finds it necessary to caution his audience about this experiment, aware of their expectations as regards epic poems and their truthfulness. Before he starts his account, he prepares them with the words: 'Wait, my brothers, till I tell you of a wonder' ['Стан'те браћо да ви чудо кажем:'].⁴¹ He forewarns them that what they are about to hear is something miraculous, extraordinary, something that requires from them to adjust their sensibilities. At the same time, he reveals his own position: he too regards this material as fantastic. And, in case they all got a bit carried away during the course of the poem, at the very end, the singer reinforces his assessment of the material: 'They lied to us, we lie to you' ('Нас лагали, ми полагујемо').⁴² In addition, Vuk Karadžić offers a variation on this line used by other singers: 'That one lied, who told me of this,/ that one lied, and I'm repeating the lie' (Онај лаже који мени каже, / Онај лаже а ја полагујем'), noting that: 'With this the singer shows that he himself does not hold everything he sings about for *utter truth*'.⁴³ This note seems significant in two ways. Firstly, as Vuk says, it shows the singer's own awareness of his material, awareness that is perhaps important to share with his listeners since the same singer might want to relate another epic song at some point and at that point the trust of the audience is something he will want to take for granted. And secondly, the fact that different singers use different variations of this ending shows that the version we have before us is not an isolated move of a particular singer, but rather a more widespread occurrence.

Similarly, the songs which recount a bold rescue operation, or some other unlikely enterprise involving, for instance, a disguised weapon-wielding woman (the

⁴¹ *Змија Младожења* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴³ 'С тијем пјевач показује, да ни он сам не држи све за *саму истину*, што се пјева.' *Ibid.*, p. 52, footnote 9.

warrior-maiden motif), also tend to end with a cheerful dismissal: ‘God knows whether this happened so,/ Anyway, brothers, let us be merry!’ (‘Бог сам знаде је ли тако било,/ А ми браћо, да се веселимо!’)⁴⁴ Or: ‘It happened when it took place,/ To us, brothers, good health and mirth!’ (‘То је било кад се и чинило,/ Нама, дружбо, здравље и весеље!’).⁴⁵ The singer of the former poem leaves the truth as an open question (God knows whether this happened so’), while the other plays with the very notion of the documentary, the form of the line promising information, but the content eluding us with its mischievous pleonasm: ‘It happened when it took place’. Both singers end their poems by inviting the audience to be merry and wishing them good health, the invitation within this particular context emphasising the fact that the song was not intended to be taken too seriously.

Yet merely wishing the audience good health and mirth does not always function as a merry dismissal of the events related. The poem about the death of the famous *uskok* (border-raider), Ivan Senjanin, ends thus: ‘And he died, woe to his mother! Let God grant him a good place in heaven!/ To us, brothers, good health and mirth!’ (‘И умрије, жалосна му мајка! Бог му дао у рају насеље!/ Нама, браћо, здравље и весеље!’).⁴⁶ While in the previous instances these wishes act as a bridge over which to slip smoothly from the world of the story back into the immediate present, in this last example, they make a sharper break and the tone is more solemn. In the songs about warrior maidens/ wives we are dealing with the stuff romances are made of, the main characters (anonymous or arbitrary) survive, and the time is perceived as one long tract of uninterrupted all-time, stretching to the present of the audience. In the last example, however, we are dealing with a well-known hero

⁴⁴ *Сестра Бурковић–сердара*; also: *Синовица пона Милутина* in: Караџић, Vol. III, p. 344 and p. 337, respectively.

⁴⁵ *Женидба бега Љубовића* in: Караџић, Vol. III, p. 382.

⁴⁶ *Смрт Сењанина Ива* in: Караџић, Vol. III, p. 164.

whose death marks a break in a seemingly concrete time in history. Wishes of good health and mirth to the audience on the one hand, and a plea for the hero's place in heaven on the other, act to separate the past and present, the world of the living and that of the dead, the world of ordinary people in pursuit of simple pleasures and comforts, and that of heroes in pursuit of great deeds and glory. To each God is asked to grant its own. Rather than as a dismissal, these wishes act in affirmation⁴⁷ of the story set in Senj and Italy, relating the exploits and fatal wounding of Ivan Senjanin.

c) Endorsement of the now

Occasionally, singers use the present to validate an event that was supposed to have happened in the past. In a number of poems a Turkish sultan (Suleiman the Magnificent in one of the variants) sets off to Islamise his Christian subjects by trying to bribe (or threaten) the patriarch (a Niko or, more often, a Savo). The contest in performing miracles between Islamic and Christian priests ensues, and, impressed by the Christian superiority in these, the Sultan nearly ends up a Christian himself. It is his vizier Ćuprilić (an Islamised Slav, as his name suggests) that lends him some sobriety and manages to channel the Sultan away from baptism and into a happy substitute: a yearly tribute in candle-wax and incense is to be given to the Church.⁴⁸ The poems end thus: 'So it was then, and so it is now' ('Како таде, тако и данаске').⁴⁹ The common knowledge that the Orthodox Church occasionally received such contributions from the Porte but also from the Islamised Slavs some of whom retained the habit of presenting churches with wax and incense at times of

⁴⁷ The example also bears witness to a remarkable flexibility of formulae, their ability to mean different (even completely opposite) things, depending on the context in which they are used.

⁴⁸ In another variant he allows the existence of a Christian church in his capital.

⁴⁹ *Цар Сулеман и Саво пампујар*; also: *Турски цар и Нико пампујар* in: *Караџић*, Vol. III, p. 50 and p. 54, respectively.

great Christian festivities (most notably Christmas and Easter),⁵⁰ is called upon to testify to the story about the contest between the religions. The same ending is applied in the song *Wedding Guests of Nuko Novljanin* (*Сватови Нука Новљанина*), in which Christian and Muslim guests turn a wedding into a bloody affair and the city of Novi changes hands: ‘It was then that Novi fell to the giaours,⁵¹ / So it was then, and so it is now (Тад је Нови под кауре пао, / Како тада, тако и данаске’).⁵² The authenticating mechanisms here resemble those circular arguments upon which legends rest: the story of a place-name (in our cases here a state of affairs) validates the place-name, while the existence of such a place-name validates the story. In this respect, the example in *The Building of Ravanica, Again*⁵³ (*Опет Зидање Раванице*) is especially intriguing. The splendour of a newly-built church dazzles the eyes of Tsar Lazar’s horse who jumps in fear, tumbling the tsar. The singer informs us: ‘That place is called “The Tsar’s Great Bruise” / So it was then, and so it is now’ (‘Ту се зове Царево Бупило, / Како тадај, тако и данаске’).⁵⁴ At this point Vuk conscientiously notes that he could not find out whether there is such a place around the monastery of Ravanica.⁵⁵ What makes this example particularly interesting is the fact that it is not necessarily the existence of a place (or a custom, or a state of affairs) in the present that validates an event, but, as though by metonymic extension, the form has acquired a validating power in its own right.

⁵⁰ See Stavrianos, L. S. *The Balkans Since 1453*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965. Also see: Ђорђевић, Тихомир. *Наш народни живот*. Београд: Просвета, 1984, Vol. II, especially p. 258.

⁵¹ This was a derogatory term Turks used for infidels generally, but in Serbian epic poems heroes wear this label with pride. (See also the note 165 on ‘rayah’ in chapter 2, p. 138.)

⁵² *Сватови Нука Новљанина in: Караџић, Vol. III, p.177.*

⁵³ ‘Again’ marks that this is the second (of two) variant of the song. For a similar case see chapter 2, note 38, p. 94.

⁵⁴ *Опет Зидање Раванице in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 156.* ‘The Tsar’s Great Bruise’ is Locke’s translation of ‘Царево Бупило’ (see Locke, Geoffrey N. W., transl. *The Serbian Epic Ballads*, Beograd: Nolit, 1997, p. 113), the rest is mine.

⁵⁵ *Опет Зидање Раванице in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 156, note 29.*

d) Censure of the now

The songs so far discussed recount events from the more or less distant past but it is interesting to see how the singers relate to contemporary events, or those set in the more recent past. There are instances in which we would not think the singer would worry about his audience's raised eyebrows, yet he still finds it necessary to distance himself from his material. Inflamed by patriotic zeal and hungry to hear about the defeat of the notorious dahijas of Belgrade Pashalik, the Montenegrin audience might have not been so shrewd and discerning in order for their singer to volunteer the following caution: 'Neither was I there, nor have witnessed it with my eye, / But I heard, others told me' ('Нит' ту био нит' оком видио, / Но сам чуо ће ми други кажу').⁵⁶ Away from contemporary struggles in neighbouring Serbia, this seems as far as the Montenegrin singer is prepared to go to vouch for his account. The situation, however, changes significantly when we look at the songs of Filip Višnjić, the singer of the First Serbian Uprising. In the poem '*The Battle of Salaš* (*Бож на Салашу*), the singer exploits precisely the obvious advantage he has over the Montenegrin. He too does not have first-hand experience of this particular battle, but he has the advantage of enjoying the hospitality of the man who led the attack, he is addressing an audience who actually took part in the event, and the poem seems to indicate that there is some independent evidence available – the site of the battle is supposedly still littered with remnants of the clash. Relating this unusual event in which a handful of Serbian rebels manage to recapture Mačva, rescue many captives and slaughter hosts of Turks,⁵⁷ Višnjić ends his poem by inviting the audience to check his account themselves. Like in the previous poem, the eyes are called upon as

⁵⁶ *Опет то из Црне Горе in: Караџић*, Vol. IV, p. 122.

⁵⁷ This event took place in 1806 in the north-west of Mačva, near the border with Bosnia. For more detail see: Koljević, Svetozar. *The Epic in the Making*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 286.

main witnesses, but this recommendation is put across especially forcefully because it is in affirmation of (rather than distancing from) the account, and because it comes from a blind singer, someone who does not have the use of his eyes, but in this case, it seems, does not need them to believe:

If there is someone who will not believe,
Let him go and see with his eyes:
The place where the Turks shed their bones
Will be known till there is sun and Salaš.

[Ако ли тко вјеровати не ће,
Нека иде и очима види:
Знати ће че Турска коштурница
Докле тече сунца и Салаша.] ⁵⁸

Yet, all this is nothing to do with honesty of a particular singer, or with what various portraits of Filip Višnjić seem to suggest: the towering personality of the singer-seer whose authority and righteousness one should not doubt. Rather, it has to do with the medium of an epic poem on the one hand, and, in our last two examples on the other hand, with the proximity of the events and the possibility of censure by people who took part in them. In fact, once outside an epic poem, Višnjić is known to have related to his villagers stories such as the one in which he, supposedly before he lost his eyesight, pretended to be blind and spied on the Turks for the insurgents; or the one in which he heroically manages to escape, his eyes freshly pierced by the Turks, and swim in such a state over the river Drina, leaving his native Bosnia for the relative safety of rebel Serbia.⁵⁹ This, as Vladan Nedić comments, has to do with the singers' imaginative capabilities, but not with some elevated sense of honesty or faithfulness: at the time of the First Serbian Uprising Višnjić was a man of fifty, his blindness was caused by chicken pox at the age of eight, which makes his first story of 'spying on Turks' difficult to imagine and his second story an outright falsehood,

⁵⁸ *Бој на Салашу in: Караџић, Vol. IV, p. 141.*

⁵⁹ *Недић, Вукови певачи, p 46.*

exhilarating though it is. Relating personal anecdotes leaves the singer with considerable freedom; relating events of wider importance and that within the solemn medium of the epic poem is quite another matter. When asked by the learned poet and cleric, Lukijan Mušicki, about the way he creates his poems,⁶⁰ Višnjić explained that he has the participants in the events interviewed.⁶¹ In addition, blind as he was, Višnjić could still hear very well, and since he followed the Serbian rebels and was never far off the battles, he also had his own experiences to draw from. In a certain sense, this method resembles that of today's war correspondents and is not that alien to historians themselves.⁶²

How serious the regard for an epic poem was might be inferred from the powerlessness of Vuk Karadžić to pacify the Serbian prince, Miloš Obrenović, infuriated by the publication of the poem *The Battle of Čačak* (*Бож на Чачку*). According to him, the poem downplayed his role in the event and this is what he wrote to Karadžić: 'I will not allow you to disseminate lies about my deeds among our kind' ('не дозвољавам вам лаж о мојим дјелима разносити по роду нашем').⁶³ It was in vain that Vuk insisted that 'a poem is not history',⁶⁴ the Prince obviously had a different idea: for most of his people, an epic poem *was* history, and if he was to be their leader, he needed to play more than a sidekick role in the epic poem. At the same time, having been a participant in the battle, the Prince feels in control of the material, which, he reckons, gives him the right to challenge the veracity of the account. This is a specific restriction that the proximity to the events and participants

⁶⁰ This, of course, is a great advantage: Mušicki here has access to the singer who (within the bounds of tradition) composes new poems about the contemporary events.

⁶¹ Недић, *Вукови певачи*, pp. 45-46 and 52.

⁶² Oral history is nowadays regarded as a well-established genre within the historical canon. See Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Currey, 1988. Also see: Prins, Gwyn. 'Oral History' in: Peter Burke, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001, pp. 120-152.

⁶³ Недић, *Вукови певачи*, p. 103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

places on the singers. Considering the epics with the contemporary theme of the liberation of Montenegro, Novak Kilibarda argues that these rarely ‘develop into poetry’⁶⁵ but more often tend to remain epic chronicles, and the reason for this, he insists, is the fact that the audience consists of the participants in the events related. According to Kilibarda, the tribal pride of ‘the ambitious warriors [...] clipped the wings of the imagination of the Montenegrin bards’.⁶⁶

3.2.2 Sagas of Icelanders

a) Affinities with historiography

The preface to the history of the Norwegian kings (*Heimskringla*) written by the famous thirteenth-century Icelandic chieftain, historian and poet, Snorri Sturluson, testifies that these kinds of considerations are not a peculiarity of the ‘truth-loving Montenegrins’,⁶⁷ as Kilibarda seems to imply, or that of the Serbian singers relating the events of the First and Second Uprisings, or Filip Višnjić in particular. In his preface Snorri emphasises the responsibility of a skaldic poet to the events he is relating. Despite the fact that the characteristic of the genre is to praise its subject, usually a king, his presence, and that of the court automatically place a restriction to the poet’s licence, as attributing to the king glorious victories he did not procure would, in Snorri’s words, be a ‘mockery, still not praise’ (*Það væri þá háð en eigi lof*).⁶⁸ This example is telling of the nature of skaldic poetry and the expectations of the audience from the genre; it is also telling of Snorri as a historian who finds it necessary to address the reliability of skaldic poetry since he means to use it as a

⁶⁵ Kilibarda, Novak. ‘The Montenegrin Oral Epic in a New Perspective.’ *Oral Tradition*, 1991, 6, (2-3), p. 281.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁸ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. Lee M. Holander, transl. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, p. 4; Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1991, Vol. I, p. 2.

source in his piece of historiography; and, precisely because of these two implications, it is also telling of the cultural climate in which the sagas of Icelanders came into being. It is the close brushing with the works which we today perceive as historiography that gives the sagas of Icelanders their distinct and peculiar sense of the documentary. Their medium, like that of historiography, is prose, and objectivity as a poetic principle is even more obvious than in Serbian epics with their formal constraints of the decasyllabic verse. In other words, objectivity becomes a feature of style.

The twelfth century marked the beginning and the thirteenth witnessed a flowering of historiographical writing in Iceland, and according to Vésteinn Ólason, this occurrence is 'now widely regarded as representing the beginnings of saga-writing'. The sagas' self-conscious concern with history is, Vésteinn Ólason continues, detectable in their 'secular perspective, [...] inclusion of skaldic stanzas, and a narrative style easily distinguishable from clerical prose'.⁶⁹ But historiographical works relied just as readily on the sagas, and Sturla Þórðarson's version of the twelfth-century Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*)⁷⁰ bears witness to the influence the sagas exert on this historical work. As Judith Jesch notes:

It is likely that the origins (written as well as traditional) of *Ldn* go back to before the first *Íslendingasögur* were written. But as the Sagas of Icelanders became an important aspect of literary activity, the overlap in subject matter between them and *Ldn* led to rapprochement between the two genres.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Although historiographical in terms of its aims and purposes, as far as the historicity of the *Landnámabók* is concerned, many scholars believe that it makes no more reliable a witness than the sagas. See for example: Gísli Sigurðsson. 'Another Audience – Another Saga: How Can We Best Explain Different Accounts in Vatdœla Saga and Finnboga Saga Ramma of the Same Events?' in: Hildegard L. C. Tristram, ed. *Text und Zeittiefe*. Script Oralia 58, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994, pp. 359-375.

⁷¹ Jesch, Judith. *The Lost Literature of Medieval Iceland: Sagas of Icelanders*. PhD. Thesis. University College London, 1984, p. 296.

Just how close together sagas and historiographical pieces come in representing the past events, can be glimpsed from the following excerpts from the *Landnámabók* (*Sturlubók*) and *Laxdæla saga* respectively:

Aud was in Caithness when she learned of Thorstein's death; she had a ship built secretly in a forest, and when it was ready she sailed away to Orkney. There she married off Groa, daughter of Thorstein the Red. Groa was mother of Grelod who married Thorfinn the Skull-Splitter.⁷²

[Auðr var þá á Katanesi, er hon spurði fall Þorsteins. Hon lét þá gera knörr í skógi á laun, en er hann var búinn, helt hon út í Orkneyjar; þar gipti hon Gró, dóttur Þorsteins rauðs; hon var móðir Grélaðar, er Þorfinnr hausakljúfr átti.]⁷³

Unn was at Caithness when her son Thorstein was killed. *Upon learning that her son had been killed, and as her father had died as well, she felt her future prospects were rather dim.* She had a knorr built secretly in the forest. *When it was finished, she made the ship ready and set out with substantial wealth. She took along all her kinsmen who were still alive, and people say it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers. It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was.*

Unn also took along with her many other people of note and from prominent families. One of the most respected was a man named Koll and called Dala-Koll. He came from a renowned family and was himself a hersir. Another man of both rank and distinction making the journey with Unn was named Hord.

Her preparations complete, Unn sailed to the Orkneys, where she stayed for a short while. There she arranged the marriage of Groa, Thorstein the Red's daughter. Groa was the mother of Grelod, who was married to Earl Thorfinn, the son of Earl Turf-Einar and grandson of Rongvald, Earl of More.⁷⁴

[Unnr djúpúðga var á Katanesi, er Þorsteinn fell, sonr hennar; ok er hon frá þat, at Þorsteinn var látinn, en faðir hennar andaðr, þá þottisk hon þar enga uppreist fá mundu. Eptir þat lætr hon gera knörr í skógi á laun; ok er skipit var algört, þá bjó hon skipit ok hafði auð fjár. Hon hafði brott með sér allt frændlið sitt, þat er á lífi var, ok þykkjask menn varla dæmi til finna, at einn kvenmaðr hafi komizk í brott ór þvílíkum ófriði með jafnmiklu fé ok föruneyti; má af því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna. Unnr hafði ok með sér marga þá menn, er mikils váru verðir ok stórættaðir. Maðr er nefndr Kollr, er einna var mest verðr af föruneyti Unnar; kom mest til þess ætt hans; hann var hersir at nafni. Sá maðr var ok í ferð með Unni, er Hörðr hét; hann var enn stórættaðr maðr ok mikils

⁷² *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók.* Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, transl. Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972, p. 51.

⁷³ *Landnámabók.* Jakob Benediktsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit 1948, Vol. I, pp. 136-138.

⁷⁴ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. The Sagas of Icelanders.* Keneva Kunz, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 278-279.

*verðr. Unnr heldr skipinu í Orkneyjar, þegar er hon var búin; þar dvalðisk hon litla hríð. Þar gipti hon Gró, dóttur Þorsteins rauðs; hon var móðir Greilaðar, er Þorfinnr jarl átti, sonr Torf-Einars jarls, sonar Rögnvalds Mærajarls]*⁷⁵

The italicised passages are the places where the saga is more elaborate than the *Sturlubók*. The saga includes Auðr/Unnr's motivation for leaving Caithness and the people she took along. However, in terms of the journey and the chronology of the events that took place as well as in phrasing, the two accounts nearly completely overlap. The question of which sagas (whether oral or written) inspired the sketches we find in *Landnámabók*, and which came about as these sketches' literary elaborations, may well amount to the chicken and the egg quandary,⁷⁶ and is not the object of this inquiry. What is of interest, however, is the ease with which the two genres seem to be able to flow into one another. Also telling is the fact that the saga authors and historiographers,⁷⁷ although 'hardly unaware of the formal differences between the two genres'⁷⁸ still do not perceive these as being so vast as to prevent them from relying on each other's accounts. Indeed, as I shall later argue more closely, the saga writers (or perhaps the scribes who noticed the similarities between the accounts) call upon famous historiographers such as Ari Þorgilsson and Sturla Þórðarson to verify their claims. And conversely, the historiographers also call upon the authority of the sagas. So, in his version of *Landnámabók*, Sturla notes: 'Thord Gellir was led to the hills before he took over the chieftaincy, *as is told in his saga*' ('þar var Þórðr gellir leiddr í, áðr hann tók mannvirðing, *sem segir í sögu hans*').⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁶ Discussing Sturla's version of *Landnámabók*, Judith Jesch notes: 'Which sagas were used by Sturla is to some extent uncertain, since it is not always possible to distinguish between a saga which was a source for *Ldn*, and one for which *Ldn* was a source [...]' (See Jesch, Judith. 'Two Lost Sagas.' *Saga-Book*, 1982-1985, 21, p. 8.)

⁷⁷ This can partially be attributed to the fact that they were often the same people.

⁷⁸ Jesch, *The Lost Literature*, p. 283.

⁷⁹ *The Book of Settlements*, p. 52; *Landnámabók*, p. 140.

It may be of interest to note here that both Miodrag Maticki⁸⁰ and Jovan Delić,⁸¹ find in the works of the nineteenth-century chroniclers of the Serbian Uprisings (1804 and 1815) Vuk Karadžić, Matija Nenadović, and Jovan Hadžić, typical expressions of epic poetry, sometimes even a hidden decasyllabic verse. In both cultures, historiography and epic have close encounters both in terms of style and some of the principles.

b) Genealogies and ultimate truths

Contrary to most epics which tend to concentrate around one or a few particular events (the battle of Roncevaux in *The Song of Roland*, or the clash of Huns and Burgundians in *The Nibelungenlied*), sagas of Icelanders are, much like medieval chronicles, ever concerned with the larger picture, with causes and effects, with contexts. One of the sagas' defining features are the extensive genealogies⁸² in the opening chapters, or chapters which introduce new characters. These genealogies trace the descent of heroes and heroines through one or both parents – kings or nobles of Norway, or prominent Icelandic settlers. Just how elaborate and reaching far into the past these genealogies can be, becomes apparent in the following example, taken from the opening of *Eirik the Red's Saga* (*Eiríks saga rauða*):

There was a warrior king named Oleif the White. He was the son of King Ingjald, who was the son of Helgi, who was son of Olaf, who was son of Gudrod, who was son of Halfdan White-leg, king of the people of Oppland.⁸³

⁸⁰ Матицки, Поновнице, p. 107.

⁸¹ Делић, Јован. *Традиција и Вук Стефановић Караџић*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1990, p. 385.

⁸² Barbara Kerewsky Halpern makes a convincing case that oral genealogies were nurtured in Serbian villages, but as a genre in its own right, not as a part of epic songs. (See Halpern, Barbara Kerewsky. 'Genealogy as Oral Genre in a Serbian Village' in: Foley, John Miles, ed. *Oral Traditional Literature*. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1981, pp. 301-331).

⁸³ *Eirik the Red's Saga* in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Keneva Kunz, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 653.

[Ólafr hét herkonungur, er kallaðr var Óláfr hvíti. Hann var sonr Ingjalds konungs Helgasonar, Ólafssonar, Guðrøðarsonar, Hálfðanarsonar hvítbeins Upplendingakonungs.]⁸⁴

But if the reader thinks the story will be about Óláfr, s/he is greatly mistaken. Óláfr gets killed within the next few sentences. Instead, the journey of his widow Auðr/Unnr ‘the Deep-minded’, daughter of Ketil Flat-nose, son of Bjorn Buna, an excellent man from Norway’ (‘Auðr in djúpúðga – dóttir Ketils flat-nefs, Bjarnarsonar bunu, ágæts manns ór Nóregi’),⁸⁵ to Iceland is briefly recounted. Yet if one thinks the story will dwell on Auðr’s settlement, one is mistaken once again, since it turns to Auðr’s bondsman Vífill, whom she freed upon her arrival in Iceland. Vífill is not the focus of the saga either, rather, the story settles around the fortunes and adventures (sailing across the Atlantic to North America being one of them) of his granddaughter, Guðríðr. What may now seem a long and somewhat arbitrary list of names must once have been a list of meaningful references, each invoking its own stories, stories which provide a context for the one at hand. On the plane of the narrative itself, the genealogy also provides an important insight into character: if Guðríðr becomes a brave pioneer woman, woman of faith and a grandmother to a bishop by the end of the saga, then there needs to be something in her roots to commend her, to tie everything together. The saga author finds only her slave-grandfather there though, but then, this slave is made exceptional; he comes highly commended by no less a figure than the renowned matriarch, one of the first Icelandic settlers, Auðr the Deep-minded. Celebrated as this woman is, the saga author perhaps finds it would not hurt to add a bit of glamour to this Icelandic connection and reminds the readers of her noble Norwegian father and her Viking-king husband. Genealogy thus becomes a powerful authenticating device, both in

⁸⁴ *Eiríks saga rauða*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds. Íslenzk fornrit, 1935, Vol. IV, p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Eirik the Red's Saga*, p. 653; *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 4.

terms of content (as we have just seen), but also in terms of form: on the one hand, it has its roots firmly set in ancient Scandinavian tradition, on the other, it is evocative of biblical genealogies and, through both of these connections, of ultimate truths.

c) *Þat mæltu sumir... Svá segir Ari/Sturla*

After the demise of her hero husband, Gunnarr, in whose downfall she played a part, Hallgerðr is mentioned on another occasion in *Njal's Saga* (*Brennu-Njáls saga*).

This time it is in connection with rumours about her relationship with the Norwegian scoundrel Hrappr. Though the writer's opinion might perhaps be inferred later on, when one of the characters calls Hallgerðr 'either an old hag or a whore'

('hornkerling eða púta'),⁸⁶ the writer himself is careful with his direct judgment of the affair. He leaves the truth as an open question: 'Some say that he [Hrappr] and Hallgerd were friendly and that he had seduced her, but others denied this' ('Þat mæltu sumir, at vingott væri með þeim Hallgerði ok hann fíflidi hana, en sumir mæltu því í móti').⁸⁷ This expression, highly evocative of historiography, functions, as Robert Kellogg notes, as a 'stylistic device designed to enhance the impression of a story's substance, by reporting that "some people say this, while others say that"',⁸⁸ and is a formulaic feature of the sagas.⁸⁹ It seems useful to remember what has been said earlier about formulae: an expression becomes a formula only if it is successful and the fact that this particular expression is so successful in the sagas of Icelanders,

⁸⁶ *Njal's Saga* in: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Robert Cook, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. III, p. 109; *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. Íslensk fornrit, 1954, Vol. XII, p. 228.

⁸⁷ *Njal's Saga*, p. 105; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 220.

⁸⁸ Kellogg, Robert. 'Literacy and Orality in the Poetic Edda' in: Doane, A.N. and C.B. Pasternack, eds. *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 93-94.

⁸⁹ Bjarne Fidjestøl sees this phrase (and its variations) as an important indicator of the oral prehistory of the written sagas as well the sagas' simultaneous oral existence: 'But even as fictive markers, they would be quite meaningless if oral story telling had not been a fact in Icelandic society.' (Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 'Norse-Icelandic Composition in the Oral Period' in: Haugen and Mundal, *Selected Papers*, p. 331.)

must be in one way or another a manifestation of a genuine concern. Theodore M.

Andersson notes:

It would [...] seem that the saga authors were accustomed to having conflicting traditions at hand and when they profess a lack of them, they are serious. They are informing the reader that the tradition goes no further, though it might reasonably have done so.⁹⁰

Whether or not this saga author genuinely weighed this particular instance⁹¹ (the likelihood of Hallgerðr's alleged involvement with Hrappr) is not only impossible ever to know for sure, but is also immaterial to this inquiry. What is important, however, is the fact that he was after 'the impression of a story's substance', making sure that the audience will trust him here, but perhaps (by metonymical extension) in other places too, where he might want to be more assertive.

In the sagas of Icelanders 'the people' whose authority of the collective is called and relied upon so often, occasionally cease to be an anonymous mass, and a concrete historical or scholarly figure emerges as an arbiter of truth. Thus, *Laxdæla saga* refers to Ari Þorgilsson, a twelfth-century scholar also known as the 'Learned' (inn fróði): 'He [Ketil Flat-nose] was killed at Caithness, according to Ari Thorgilson the Learned' ('svá segir Ari Þorgilsson inn fróði [...], at hann [Ketill flat-nefr] felli á Katanesi').⁹² Or: 'Snorri then died, aged threescore years and seven, one year after the fall of king Olaf the Saint, according to the priest Ari the Learned' ('Síðan andaðisk Snorri. Hann hafði þá sjau vetr ins sjaunda tigar. Þat var einum vetri eptir

⁹⁰ Andersson, Theodore M. 'Textual Evidence for an Oral Family Saga.' *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi*, 1966, 81, p. 14.

⁹¹ For a comprehensive survey of the appearance of this phrase (*Þat mæltu sumir...*) as well as its variations in the sagas, see Andersson's above article. See also William Manhire's critique of the premise upon which Andersson's inference of spurious and genuine usages of this phrase is based: 'There is no reason why source-references should not be "genuine" and rhetorical at the same time.' (Manhire, William. 'The Narrative Functions of Source-References in the Sagas of Icelanders.' *Saga-Book*, 1974-77, 19, p. 175.)

⁹² *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 278; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 7.

fall Óláfs konungs ins helga; svá sagði Ari prestr inn fróði').⁹³ While the present tense of the verb *segja* ('to say') in the first example provides the reference to Ari with the sense of immediacy, the second one achieves a similar effect by providing a specific time reference: 'one year after the fall of king Olaf the Saint'. In this last case, the surviving fragment of *Ævi Snorra goða* suggests the possibility of a historiographical source behind the author's remark; as noted earlier, the two genres often encroach upon one another. Similarly, the writer of *Grettir's Saga* (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*) calls upon the authority of another distinguished scholar and a member of the famous Sturlung family that has given its name to an epoch, Sturla Þórðarson, in order to establish the year of Grettir's outlawry in which he settled on Drangey island, and also when giving his final assessment of Grettir at the very end of the saga.⁹⁴ Interestingly enough, the same saga author occasionally treats his hero as one of the 'witnesses', his testimony reported, rather than offered as an ordinary piece of dialogue, which enhances the documentary effect. In addition, the authority of the saga author becomes enhanced too, since he places himself in a direct relationship to the source. Thus, after Grettir's legendary encounter with the bear, we are informed that: 'He [Grettir] said later that holding off that bear was his greatest feat of strength' ('Svá hefir Grettir sagt, at han þóttisk þá aflraun mesta gört hafa, at halda dýrinu').⁹⁵ Or, after the struggle with the undead Glámr, the hero's testimony is called upon again: 'Grettir himself has said that this [Glámr glaring up at the moon] was the only sight that ever unnerved him' ('svá hefir Grettir sagt sjálfr, at þá eina sýn hafi hann sét svá, at honum brygði við').⁹⁶ Perhaps this last example points to the extent to which typically historiographical expressions infiltrate the language of the

⁹³ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 420; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 226.

⁹⁴ *Grettir's Saga* in: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Bernard Scudder, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. II, p. 191; *Grettis saga*, p. 289.

⁹⁵ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 84; *Grettis saga*, p. 77.

⁹⁶ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 106; *Grettis saga*, p. 121.

sagas. Whether or not the audience believed in the living dead, (as John Lindow notes, ‘every society has its skeptics’⁹⁷), the form itself is there to give the material the sense of the documentary.

Yet, this does not mean that in *Grettis saga* the content of the story is in any way neglected, or that the undoubted trust of the audience is taken for granted. On the contrary, what is taken for granted is the audience’s shrewdness, or at least the shrewdness of some of its members. This becomes apparent in the way in which the men gathered at the Assembly interpret young Grettir’s verses, just after everybody learns about the death of Skeggi, a farmhand with whom Grettir had a dispute regarding a certain missing food-bag. In Grettir’s song, the death of Skeggi is ascribed to a *hamartroll* (‘a cleft-dwelling troll/ an ogress’). The men seriously consider Grettir’s poem but are not inclined to believe it, since they ‘know’ that trolls do not attack in daylight. Their leader, Porkell, goes a step further in his interpretation. He knows the language of poetry and he knows that the ‘ogress’ from Grettir’s poem might as well be an axe, and that the verses are actually his declaration of the killing. So, he is not so much interested in the ‘whodunit’ of the story, but rather how the whole thing happened. He dismisses his men’s interpretation with the following words: ‘There is more to it [the poem] than that; Grettir must have killed him. So, how did it happen?’ (‘Önnur efni munu í vera, ok mun Grettir hafa drepit hann; eða hvat bar til?’)⁹⁸ But astute perception and interpretation is not limited to poetry and those initiated into its secret code; rather, it is exercised (with more or less success) on any kind of story. Hence, after the burning of some Icelanders in Norway is ascribed to Grettir by the ill-wishers who

⁹⁷ Lindow, John. ‘*Þorsteins þáttur skelks* and the Verisimilitude of Supernatural Experience in Saga Literature’ in: *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. John Lindow et al. eds. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986, p. 274.

⁹⁸ *Grettir’s Saga*, p. 70; *Grettis saga*, p. 47.

only have some circumstantial evidence to build their case upon, Skapti the Lawspeaker makes the following comment:

Certainly this is an evil deed, if the account is correct. But one man only tells half a tale, and more people prefer the worse side of a story which has two versions. I shall not declare Grettir an outlaw for this deed under the present circumstances.⁹⁹

[Víst er þetta illt verk, ef svá er, sem þetta er sagt; en jafnan er hálsögð saga, ef einn segir, því at fleiri eru þess fúsari, at færa þangat, sem eigi berr betr, ef tvennt er til. Nú mun ek eigi leggja órskurð á, at Grettir sé sekr görr um þetta at svá göru.]¹⁰⁰

Presuming that this is Skapti's clever way of persuading the people gathered to be more favourably inclined to Grettir (or at least keep an open mind), one still has to acknowledge that in order for it to work, the assumptions regarding the credibility of the stories that underlie his argument have to be widely accepted, the sensibilities have to be in place. Inasmuch as it recommends caution when one is faced with only one version of an account, and inasmuch as it expresses doubt in one's own attraction to the 'worse' (and so more ostensible and lurid) side of a story, the passage reads as a saga-writing manifesto.

Whether some of the references to Ari, Sturla or 'some people' were made by the authors of the first written versions of the sagas or were later additions by diligent scribes is not crucial to the present study. Firstly, none of the 'original' manuscripts survives, which means that every saga that we have now went through at least one redaction (and it is those we mean when we say 'the sagas of Icelanders', not the first written versions which are lost and therefore forever remain in the realm of speculation). More importantly, as argued in the previous chapters, the scribes are not to be discounted but taken to contribute to the whole notion of saga authorship. Secondly, in a highly traditional idiom such as the sagas, it seems quite unlikely that

⁹⁹ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁰ *Grettis saga*, p. 146.

a scribe would introduce a novelty which would seriously jar the sensibilities of his predecessors and his audience. Rather, it seems more plausible to conceive that he would have been in tune with these established sensibilities, and that each time he added a reference himself, he strove to reinforce them.

d) Facts, figures, and 'evidence'

What also becomes immediately apparent upon consideration of the sagas of Icelanders is that, in addition to concrete references, the sense of authenticity comes across through the authors' very interest in facts and figures, in places and time-frames. This is taken even further when the flow of narration is disrupted and customs, beliefs, religious or legal practices of the past that is perceived as past are commented upon. Thus the author of *Grettis saga* looks at the time of Settlement, the time of plenty, with mild envy: 'No agreement was reached about harvesting the beach, because so much drifted in that everyone could take what he wanted' ('en um rekann var ekki skilit, því at þeir váru svá nógir þá, at hverr hafði þat, er vildi').¹⁰¹ Describing a feast that had as an additional entertaining feature a soothsayer, the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* informs us that: 'Ingjald and his men prepared a magic rite in the old heathen fashion, so that men could examine what the fates had in store for them' ('Þeir Ingjaldr efna þar seið eptir fornum sið, til þess at menn leitaði eptir forlögum sínum').¹⁰² Another time, concerning a lawsuit at the Assembly that required a character to crawl under three arches of raised turf, he comments that 'it was then the custom after serious offences' ('sem þá var siðr eptir stórar afgörðir').¹⁰³ At the very beginning of the same saga, a character will lecture his son somewhat too

¹⁰¹ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 58; *Grettis saga*, p. 23.

¹⁰² *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* in: Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Andrew Wawn, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 204; *Vatnsdæla saga*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit, 1939, Vol. VIII, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰³ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 241; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 87.

extensively on the customs of old chieftains for us not to feel the author's own impulse to explain those to his audience who must have been (as is the modern reader) in greater need of explanations than Ketill's son could ever have been. So, after treating his son to the age-old sermon on the failure of youths to live up to their elders, after rubbing his son's nose into all of his own successes as a raider, Ketill still goes on to say:

It was once the custom of powerful men, kings or earls – those who were our peers – that they went off raiding, and won riches and renown for themselves, and such wealth did not count as any legacy, nor did a son inherit it from his father; rather was the money to lie in the tomb alongside the chieftain himself. And even if the sons inherited the lands, they were unable to sustain their high status, if honour counted for anything, unless they put themselves and their men to risk and went into battle, thereby winning for themselves, each in his turn, wealth and renown – and so following in the footsteps of their kinsmen.¹⁰⁴

[Þat var ríkra manna siðr, konunga eða jarla, várra jafningja, at þeir lágu í hernaði ok öfluðu sér fjár ok frama, ok skyldi þat fé eigi til arfs telja né sonr eptir föður taka, heldr skyldi þat fé í haug leggja hjá sjálfum höfðingjum. Nú þótt synir þeira tæki jarðir, máttu þeir eigi haldask í sínum kostum, þótt virðing felli til, nema þeir legði sik ok sína menn í hættu ok herskap, aflandi [sér] svá fjár ok frægðar, hverr eptir annan, ok stíga svá í fótspor frændum sínum.]¹⁰⁵

This concern with authenticity sometimes grows into full-blown antiquarian passion as it goes on to include what resembles archaeological evidence. While *Laxdæla saga* relates certain place-names to Unnr the Deep-minded's exploration of Iceland in a legend-like manner (thus the place where she loses her comb comes to be named Kambsnes, for example), *Grettis saga*'s laconic remark about the fate of the spear we have just witnessed Grettir leaving in the body of one of his enemies sounds a lot more plausible: we are informed that at the time of Sturla Þórðarson this spear was found in the same field where the clash took place. Richard Perkins emphasises the

¹⁰⁴ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p.190.

¹⁰⁵ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 5.

great authenticating power of these objects that are ‘mentioned in the *ritöld*¹⁰⁶ source as having a history in the *söguöld*,¹⁰⁷ and still existing in the *ritöld*’.¹⁰⁸ In fact, when the story of an object supposed to have played a part in the *söguöld* cannot be supported by its existence in the *ritöld*, saga authors go out of their way to supply a detailed explanation for such a state of affairs. Perkins draws the following conclusion:

[T]his suggests that saga-audiences in the *ritöld* were actively interested in the whereabouts in their own times of some of the more valuable or lethal objects mentioned in the sagas. And perhaps they even expected such objects, or objects purporting to be them, to be available for inspection.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, the author of *Egils saga* thoroughly exploits this ‘availability for inspection’ of his chosen object, as he actually examines the physical features of the ‘evidence’. Describing Skallagrímr’s search for a suitable rock on which to forge his iron, the author steps out of the immediate narrative frame in order to treat us to the following curiosity:

That rock is still there with a pile of slag beside it, and its top is marked from being hammered upon. It has been worn by the waves and is different from the other rocks there. Four men today could not lift it.¹¹⁰

[Liggr sá steinn þar enn ok mikit sindr hjá, ok sér þat á steininum, at hann er barðr ofan ok þat er brimsorfit grjót ok ekki því grjóti glíkt öðru, er þar er, ok munu nú ekki meira hefja fjórir menn.]¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ ‘The age of writing’ – the time when the sagas were written down.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Saga-age’ – the time in which the events that the sagas describe took place.

¹⁰⁸ Perkins, Richard. ‘Objects and Oral Tradition in Medieval Iceland’ in: McTurk, R. and A. Wawn, eds. *Úr Döllum til Dala: Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*. Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1989, p. 252.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹¹⁰ *Egil’s Saga*, p. 50.

¹¹¹ *Egils saga*, p. 79.

What is projected onto the reader through this kind of passion for historical - archaeological detail which is at the same time related expediently, with some urgency and matter-of-factness, is the overwhelming sense of legitimacy, of substance.

* * *

In this section I have examined the ways in which this sense of legitimacy and substance is achieved in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics, not whether there is some legitimacy and substance in them. Varied and imaginative as these attempts at authentication are, they are not brought here to vouch that we are dealing with material which is more authentic than any other. The emphasis is rather on the fact that, stepping out from the immediate flow of narration in order to affirm, question or comment on the veracity of their material, saga authors and Serbian epic singers successfully manage to lower the readers' own investigative drive and thus achieve the impression of a disinterested account.

The choice of the sagas for this purpose, although not comprehensive since I did not aim at a survey here, is still reasonably varied. It includes both earlier (*Laxdæla saga*, *Egils saga*) and later (*Vatsndæla saga*, *Grettis saga*) exemplars of the genre. What has, however, by now become obvious even to a casual enthusiast, not to mention a connoisseur of Serbian epic poetry, is that none of the poems considered here belongs to the Kosovo cycle - that famous part which is often taken to signify the whole. Indeed, the instances of singers' interruptions are scarce in these poems, and when they happen it is usually in conclusion and confirmation of the event related: '[...] thence our Prince perished too./ Thence the Serbs lost their

empire' ('[...] ту нам је и кнез погинуо./ Ту су Србљи изгубили царство').¹¹² On one occasion, in the song by the 'Blind woman from Grgurevci', the whole event is observed from the religious perspective (a common trait of blind women-singers)¹¹³ and, accordingly, it is evaluated in terms of its relationship to God and his plan: 'All this is done with good grace and honor,/ before the eyes of God the Lord Almighty' ('Све је свето и честито било/ И миломе Богу приступачно').¹¹⁴ Nothing much is questioned here. Perhaps this is not surprising: the legend about Kosovo was so widely spread, developed and believed in, that questions about it seem unimaginable. There is, however, an additional explanation worth considering. The poems which, as we have witnessed, come under the singers' scrutiny in terms of veracity are those which involve either non-identifiable personages and events on the one hand, or all-too-identifiable contemporaries and events which are still undergoing poetic rendering, on the other. The existence of this tradition of scrutinising seems unlikely simply to be broken when Kosovo songs are in question. Rather, it seems more likely that the absence of such scrutiny is only seeming in these songs: they may have simply kept passing the test. In other words, what we have here is not the absence of information, but the information of absence.¹¹⁵ The first one is a negative category, the second a positive. In other words, the general exhibition of the singers' concern with authenticity of the material functions as reassurance in a particular case when such concerns are not displayed. The trust of the audience, carefully built over time

¹¹² *Мусић Стеван in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 220.*

¹¹³ As these women depended on alms for sustenance, they spent much of their time within the proximity of monasteries and churches. Both of these factors reflected on their singing. (See *Недић, Вукови певачи*, pp. 62-83.)

¹¹⁴ *The Fall of the Serbian Empire in: Holton and Mihailovich, Songs, p. 150; Пронаст царства српскога in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 216;*

¹¹⁵ This is a paraphrase of an important distinction made by Daniel Dennett: '[...] The absence of representation is not the same as the representation of absence' (Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained*, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 359).

and confirmed every now and then when contemporary material is dealt with, is now presumed, taken for granted.

3.3 Emergent Realism of ‘Loose Ends and Contradictions’

Engaging in the sophisticated authenticating game, reassuring the reader/listener by ‘stepping out of the story’, is the more overt way in which the sagas’ and Serbian epics’ realism manifests itself. This section is, however, concerned with the untidy, the unpolished, the contradictory; with the resistance to the smooth progression of action, with friction, the narrative cross-currents and uncertainties – all those qualities Erich Auerbach emphasised as important to our sense of authenticity,¹¹⁶ and that permeate the pasts in the sagas and Serbian epics. As suggested in previous chapters, these qualities have in the two literatures less to do with the deliberate pursuit of ‘the reality effect’ (i.e. representational realism), and more with their emergent realism, as they arise from (or, accumulate as a result of) the unfettered evolutionary processes that affected the production of sagas and Serbian epics – their distributed author.

3.3.1 Golden ages and fishing camps: texture of the past in *Íslendingasögur*

a) Generous tyrants: join, fight, or flee?

If, looking macrocosmically, with the whole corpus of the Sagas of Icelanders in mind, we make a sweeping observation that in *Egils saga* the tyranny of Haraldr triggered the colonisation of Iceland, there is *Vatnsdæla* to problematise the issue of tyranny, for in this saga a hero moves to Iceland compelled by destiny and most

¹¹⁶ Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 19. See also chapter 1, p. 68.

unwillingly takes leave of his beloved liege. Haraldr is even presented as a dignified royal figure who, sensing that his retainer is about to leave him, makes this known and hints, partly aggrieved, partly irritated, that it is possible to leave with his blessing instead of stealing away, ‘which is very much the fashion nowadays’ (‘sem nú tekr mjök at tíðkask’).¹¹⁷ On the microcosmic level, though, both sagas are more intriguing as regards their attitudes to Haraldr. If the writer of *Egils saga* openly comments that ‘many people fled the country to escape this tyranny’ (‘af þessi áþján flýðu margir menn af landi á brott’),¹¹⁸ he also lets other voices be heard, voices that oppose him either regarding the king, or fleeing as the optimal solution. For Sölvi Chopper and Egill’s uncle, Þórólfr, and their obdurate sense of honour, fleeing is a humiliating act and thus not an option. However, they differ greatly in the way they see king Haraldr. Sölvi, a son of a defeated king, Húnþjófr, comes to seek help from another minor king and addresses him thus:

You will face the same choice we had: either to defend your property and freedom by staking all the men you can hope to muster [...] or to follow the course taken by the people of Naumdal who voluntarily entered servitude and became Harald’s slaves.¹¹⁹

[Munu þér inn sama kost fyrir höndum eiga, sem vér áttum, at verja fé yðvart ok frelsi ok kosta þar till allra þeirra manna, er yðr er liðs at ván, [...] en at öðrum kosti munu þér vilja taka upp þat ráð, sem Naumdælir gerðu, at ganga með sjálfvilja í ánauð ok gerask þrælar Haralds.]¹²⁰

That Haraldr is an oppressor is taken for granted here, but not everyone in the saga sees joining his ranks as servitude and slavery. The aforementioned Egill’s uncle regards it in fact as ‘a very attractive proposition’ (‘allfýsiligt’), for Haraldr’s men

live a much better life than anyone else in this country. And I’m told that the king is very generous to his men and no less liberal in

¹¹⁷ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 207; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 34.

¹¹⁸ *Egil’s Saga*, p. 11; *Egils saga*, p. 12.

¹¹⁹ *Egil’s Saga*, p. 10.

¹²⁰ *Egils saga*, p. 8.

granting advancement and power to people he thinks worthy of it. I've also heard about all people who turn their backs on him and spurn his friendship, and they never become great men – some of them are forced to flee the country, and others are made his tenants.¹²¹

[eru haldnir miklu betr en allir aðrir í þessu landi. Er mér svá frá sagt konungi, at hann sé inn mildasti af fégjöfum við menn sína ok eigi síðr 'þess örr at gefa þeim framgang ok veita ríki þeim, er honum þykkja til þess fallnir. En mér spyrsk á þann veg til um alla þá, er bakverpask vilja við honum ok þýðask eigi hann með vináttu, sem allir verði ekki at manna; stökkva sumir af landi á brott, en sumir gerask leigumenn.]¹²²

The saga writer's perspective that is in line with those who followed the third option – fleeing the country – has the benefit of hindsight and proves ultimately right, of course. People like Sölvi Chopper never really stand a chance, and people like Þórólfr fall victim to the fickle favours of a ruler as well as to their own social ambition. Yet their choices are presented respectfully, as valid options. Confronting the famous lapidary saga style with the amount of space allotted to Sölvi's and Þórólfr's speeches, as well as the fact that their words are quoted, not merely summarised, one can fully appreciate the importance given to the two characters' stances. And they are not just any characters either: Þórólfr is the hero of the first thirty chapters of *Egils saga* (a decent-sized saga in its own right), and Sölvi, although featuring very briefly in *Egils saga*, delivers a nearly identical speech¹²³ and continues to pop up now and again¹²⁴ in Snorri's saga about king Haraldr. We are also told that 'for a long time Solvi continued as a powerful viking and often inflicted heavy damage in King Harald's realm' ('Sölvi var síðan víkingr mikill

¹²¹ *Egil's Saga*, p. 13.

¹²² *Egils saga*, pp. 14–15.

¹²³ This is no wonder if *Egils saga* is indeed the work of Snorri Sturluson, as some scholars believe (see chapter 1, note 114, p. 34). Of course, on its own, the passage in question is not enough to ascertain this since oral tradition too is capable of preserving such a speech.

¹²⁴ See chapters 11, 32, 33.

langa hrið ok gerði optliga mikinn skaða á ríki Haralds konungs’).¹²⁵ Sölvi never gets caught or killed either. None of the king’s other opponents in the saga can boast of such a feat. It is easy to infer that a reader of or the listener to *Egils saga*, if not familiar with Snorri’s *Saga of Harald Fairhair*, would have known about Sölvi’s exploits from oral tradition.

As mentioned before, Sölvi’s and Þórólfr’s stances are not subverted, slighted or patronised by the saga writer, but are rather imbued with some admiration. Sölvi’s brave words hark back to the concept of honour based on physical prowess and staunch moral stamina, a concept that may be slightly outdated but still looms large in saga literature, while Þórólfr’s social ambition is not negative *per se* and is well established within Viking pragmatism and the ethics of entrepreneurship. Besides, balanced, diplomatic people in *Egils saga* such as Þórólfr’s kinsman, Ölvir Hump, or Egill’s friend Arinbjörn, seem to manage just fine in the service of a king, even when he is called Eiríkr Blood-Axe. By infusing such different perspectives with credibility, the writer’s own bias becomes modified, even blurred with these other points of view, and thus non-oppressive. Whether this is a result of a direct and positive action, such as the self-conscious decision on the part of the saga author to include these different and valid perspectives, or a result of a negative action, a reflex even, such as simply leaving unmoulded and unpolished the accreted and occasionally disparate material from oral tradition, or, more likely, a little bit of both, the effect is the same: the saga is imbued with the aura of a document.

We encounter a similar array of perceptions of Haraldr and attitudes to the settlement of Iceland if we start from the apparently opposite end – *Vatnsdæla*.

¹²⁵ *Saga of Harald Fairhair in: Snorri Sturluson, History*, p. 68; *Haralds saga ins hárfagra in: Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla*, p. 106.

While this saga may project the kindest view of Haraldr, it also contains the worst. Nowhere else are ‘kings’ (and the plural here is a euphemism, because it is Haraldr whom the character has in mind) paired with criminals (or literally: ‘evildoers’). The hero of the saga, Ingimundr, is, we hear at some length, on friendly terms with the king, but this is what his foster-brother has to say:

I am off to Iceland this summer along with my brother, and many consider this no shame even though they are of noble birth. I have heard good things about the land – that livestock feed themselves during the winters, that there are fish in every river and lake, and great forests, and that men are free from assaults of *kings and criminals*.¹²⁶

[ok ætla ek nú í sumar til Íslands og vit báðir bræðr, ok láta sér nú þat margir sóma, þótt göfgir sé; er mér sagt gott frá landakostum, at þar gangi fé sjálfala á vetrum, en fiskr í hverju vatni, skógar miklir, en frjálsir af ágangi konunga ok illræðismanna.]¹²⁷

It is important to note that soon after this, friendly with the king as he is, Ingimundr still follows his foster-brother’s lead and sets off to Iceland.

With the whole saga corpus in mind, *Vatnsdæla* and *Egils saga* may represent two extremes in the spectrum of possible attitudes to Haraldr Finehair, yet whatever we learn in either of them about the king and his impact on the colonisation of Iceland is still very difficult to force into a single strand. In each of them we see a strong figure appearing on the Norwegian political scene: a unifier of the kingdom and an obstinate upstart; a source of opportunities and social advancement, and a despoiler of freedom and lives; a dignified ruler, a righteous man, and a paranoid tyrant, a man prone to flattery and easily manipulated. The opposites I have abstracted here in what Auerbach would probably regard as a legend-like determinism are, of course, not given in the two sagas in such a manner. Rather, all

¹²⁶ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 205.

¹²⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 30-31.

these Haraldrs that we find negotiate with, or modulate, one another. In addition, the Norwegian political scene itself is not, as we have seen, represented as being of a piece and, therefore, the reactions to Haraldr's rise and the responses to the emigration to Iceland are layered. In their multitude, these perspectives condition one another and thus we do not feel burdensomely coerced by any one of them. On the other hand, and precisely because of it, we tend to believe them all.

The whole notion of tyranny as the reason for emigration is further cast into relief by the sagas that fall in between the two 'extremes' discussed. Such is the saga of Gísli, where king Haraldr is not even mentioned, but the hero lands himself in trouble for personal reasons, gets outlawed from Norway and has to leave; or *Hrafnkels saga*, in which we are only informed in passing that the time when the hero's father came to Iceland was that of Haraldr. In this case the saga writer may have counted on his audience's knowledge of Haraldr's tyranny, but then again, writing after the end of the republic he may have chosen not to make a big point out of it: Iceland could hardly represent a tyrant-free safe-haven any longer. *Laxdæla saga* may have begun with opposition to Haraldr, but the emigration to Iceland happens from the Viking colonies in Britain, with the fall of the Norse kings of York and Scotland, suggesting the crumbling of the Viking commonwealth as an all-encompassing problem and thus shifting the focus from the narrow field of Haraldr's tyranny in Norway.

b) Desolate outcrops or fields of dripping butter?

Just as we find no cohesive portrait of Haraldr, the images of Iceland itself are also all but unified. They range from those of Edenic, virginal land (as in some of the passages quoted above), to those of an inhospitable, hell-like place of tarnished

hopes. Interestingly enough, we can already glimpse this range in the already mentioned piece of historiography – *Landnámabók*. We encounter it condensed in the lively story about Flóki, the man who, *Landnámabók* has it, gave Iceland this very inviting and optimistic name. After losing (due to some bad luck and his own failure to secure winter provisions) all his livestock in Iceland over the winter, a disappointed Flóki and his companions sail back to Norway.

When they were asked about the new country, Floki had nothing good to say of it, but Herjolf described its merits as well as its faults. Thorolf said that in the land they'd found, butter was dripping from every blade of grass. That's why people called him Thorolf Butter.¹²⁸

[Ok er menn spurðu af landinu, þá lét Flóki illa yfir, en Herjólf sagði kost ok löst af landinu, en Þórólfr kvað drjúpa smjör af hverju strái a landinu, því er þeir höfðu fundit; því var hann kallaðr Þórólfr smjör.]¹²⁹

What is here anecdotally summed up, forced into three clear-cut attitudes to the land (two extreme opposites of Flóki and Þórólfr and a moderate view of Herjólf) is given in a spectrum of attitudes which occasionally merge with, melt into one another in the sagas.

On his arrival to Iceland, Grettir the Strong's ancestor Önundr is offered some land by an already established, wealthy man, Eiríkr Snare, who tries to impress Önundr with the vastness of the land that is still available. Önundr's gaze, however, is fixed upon an imposing snowy mountain, and the emotion it inspires is immediately transposed into the verses of lament:

“I've bartered
my grain fields for icy Kaldbak.” (‘Cold-Ridge’)¹³⁰

[“...kröpp eru kaup, ef hreppik

¹²⁸ *The Book of Settlements*, p. 18.

¹²⁹ *Landnámabók*, p. 38.

¹³⁰ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 58.

Kaldbak, en ek læt akra.”]¹³¹

Önundr’s verses curb Eiríkr’s earlier enthusiasm and prompt him into a quiet admission: ‘Many have left so much in Norway that they can never be compensated’ (‘Margr hefir svá mikils misst í Nóregi, at menn fá þess ekki bœtr’).¹³² Indeed, the images of Iceland are as much of a psychological as geographical nature. As such they change within one single perspective transcending in their dynamism a mere series of still-lives. The hero of *Vatnsdæla saga*, Ingimundr, feels forced to sell his ‘fine ancestral lands and head off to that wilderness’ (‘áttjarðir mínar magrar ok góðar, en fara í eyðibýggðir þær’),¹³³ and ‘that desolate outcrop’ (‘eyðisker þetta’).¹³⁴ Once there, however, he is resigned to make an unfavourable situation a success:

“Our home here may not be as cheery as the one in Norway, but we need not think about that because there are many good men assembled here for some fun, and so let us enjoy ourselves as far as our resources allow.”¹³⁵

[“Nú mun eigi vera vistin jafnglöð sem í Nóregi, en eigi þarf nú at minnask á þat, því at margir góðir drengir eru hér enn saman komnir til gamans, ok gleðjumsk enn eptir tilföngum.”]¹³⁶

This acceptance slightly alters his perspective on the land. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the saga writer’s perspective, his own longing perhaps coming from the times of depleted resources, gets entangled with that of his characters:

The excellence of the land can be judged from the fact that all the sheep fed themselves outdoors. It is also said that some pigs went missing from Ingimund’s land and were not found until the autumn the following year, and by that time there were a hundred of them in all; they have become wild [...] Ingimund [...] declared that it

¹³¹ *Grettis Saga*, p. 22.

¹³² *Grettir’s Saga*, p. 58; *Grettis Saga*, p. 22.

¹³³ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 205; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 29.

¹³⁴ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 204; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 27.

¹³⁵ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 211.

¹³⁶ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 40.

could be truly said that there were two heads on every one of them.¹³⁷

[ok má af því marka landskosti þá, er í þat mund váru, at fét gekk allt sjálfala úti. Þess er enn getit, at svín hurfu frá Ingimundi ok fundusk eigi fyrr en annat sumar at hausti, ok váru þá saman hundrað, þau váru stygg orðin [...] Ingimundr [...] kvað svá rétt at mæla, at tvau höfuð væri á hvívetna.]¹³⁸

Although this lush fertility is not without its sense of the uncanny, we can see that ‘by now Ingimund felt comfortable in Vatnsdal’ (‘Ingimundr festi nú ynði í Vatnsdal’).¹³⁹ In confirmation of this, when Ingimundr goes back to Norway for some building timber and King Haraldr asks him about Iceland, we are told that he ‘spoke well of it’ (‘hann lét vel yfir’).¹⁴⁰ As Ingimundr becomes more settled and prosperous, so the images of Iceland change and the extreme feelings disappear.

3.3.2 Royal robes and shepherds’ cloaks: texture of the past in *srpske junačke pesme*

a) *Virtuous sinners and wavering saints*

Tensions and balances similar to those we have been exploring in the sagas’ rendering of the past are also detectable in the way medieval Serbia is presented in the epic poems. Serbian epic tradition holds the Nemanjić dynasty, the founders of the first Serbian state, in high esteem, and the two variants of the poem *St. Sava* are little more than the singers’ laudatory apotheoses of this. After a liturgy, Serbian nobles gather and start speculating on the whereabouts of Stefan Nemanja’s immense wealth (majestic palaces? wars to further his earthly glory?). Nemanja’s youngest son and the founder of the Serbian autocephalous church, Sava, overhears them and he is thus prompted to defend the wisdom of his family’s investments. This

¹³⁷ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 212.

¹³⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 42-43.

¹³⁹ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 212; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁰ *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 213; *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 44.

effectuates an occasion for the singers to list a long catalogue¹⁴¹ of monasteries and churches that the Nemanjićes built as their memorials (and, in Višnjić's case, some that they did not!), as well as their charitable deeds. The nobles then give due praise (even if in anachronistic 'turbizmi'¹⁴²) and reaffirm their respect for the Nemanjićes:

“Good on you all, Savo Nemanjić!
When you had seven palacefuls of treasure,
And you knew how to use it.
What you wear, let it shine,
What you sire, let it be holy.”

[“Бе аферим, Немањићу Саво!
Кад имасте седам кула блага,
Те знадoste управљати благом.
Што носили, свијетло вам било!
Што родили, све вам свето било!”]¹⁴³

However, not the Nemanjićes, not their riches, not even respect for the Church and the men of the cloth, are left spotless and untouched by the epic tradition. In the mentioned variant about Tsar Dušan's attempt to marry his own sister, great wealth indeed was spent (we are told the Tsar 'does not hesitate to squander his treasure') while trying to fulfil the task the princess Roksandra set. As he succeeds, his sister, seeing that there is no use challenging his wealth, capability, might, anything worldly as he seems to be in complete control of these, asks that he builds a magnificent church and that he summons:

“[...] three hundred monks,
And twelve holy archpriests,
And four Serbian Patriarchs
And bring deacon Jovan
And three hundred of his young students;
Let them, my brother, make a decision for me.”

[“[...] триста калуђера,
И дванаест светијех владика

¹⁴¹ Filip Višnjić makes more of the opportunity in his variant than the Blind Stepanija does in hers.

¹⁴² Turkish words incorporated into Serbian language.

¹⁴³ *Onem Svetu Sаво in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 82.

И четири Српска патријара,
И доведеш ђакона Јована
И његово ђеце триста луде;
Па како ни, мој брате, расуде.”]¹⁴⁴

This church, magnificent as it is, is a perversion of the church-building that Sava describes, building as a memorial, for the soul’s rest and goodness. Furthermore, the Tsar manages to bribe all the high officials of the Church, Sava’s brethren. Only the lowest, deacon Jovan and his students, prove incorruptible, and after everybody greets Dušan’s sister as his Tsaritsa, Jovan and ‘his children’ address her as ‘poor Roksandra’, cursing the prospective marriage. Dušan then sets all the clergy aflame and after Jovan and his students turn saintly while the ground under the rest sinks and fills with muddy water which swallows their bones, the Tsar dares not pursue his sister any longer.

This is the song that straightforwardly holds the most powerful of the Nemanjićes in contempt,¹⁴⁵ but is not the only one that views Dušan critically. While the Tsar’s might and his wealth are showcased in each of the following poems with gusto and approval, in each, the Tsar makes terrible breaches in social custom and order. In the famous *Wedding of Tsar Dušan* (this time the prospective bride is from afar, from the ‘Latin’, or Catholic, Western world), he does not invite his nephews to the wedding – a breach in kinship relationships; in the *Wedding of Prince Lazar* he is reproached for failing to produce a bride for his cup-bearer and future successor, Lazar – a breach in suzerain/vassal relationships; in *Momir the Foundling* he lets himself be talked into having his foster-son killed – a breach in adoptive parent/child relationships; and in *How to Honour Slava*, he compromises his relationship with his

¹⁴⁴ Душан хоће сестру да узме in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 97.

¹⁴⁵ There is also a variant in which he intimates a desire to marry his sister, only to ascribe it, the morning after, to a harmless drunken gibberish. See: *Удаја сестре Душанове* in: Караџић, Vol. II, pp. 100-101.

patron saint, Archangel Michael. The Archangel stands on Dušan's right shoulder, gently stroking his cheek with his wing all the while his protégé behaves in a proper manner. But once he sits down with his guests before even toasting to the *slava*, the Archangel gets annoyed, slaps the Tsar across the face with the same wing he was stroking him a moment ago, and leaves the palace. It takes three days and nights of fervent prayer for the saint to return his favours, and that grudgingly.¹⁴⁶

Be this as it may, there is an important twist in the portrayal of Dušan, both as a person and as a ruler. Great wealth and power are not his only virtues. In *Momir the Foundling* Dušan adopts a helpless babe he found while hunting. As the foundling grows into a promising young man, the Tsar's gentle favour and parental pride is thus described:

Wherever the noble Tsar goes,
He has Momir close by his side,
Close by his side, like a spray of flowers.

[Кудгод иде царе господине,
Поред себе води и Момира,
Поред себе, кано киту цвећа;]¹⁴⁷

In the *Wedding of Tsar Dušan*, we witness his imperial magnanimity and merciful nature. When the oddly magnificent horse belonging to a 'poor slumbering shepherd' (Dušan's nephew, Miloš Voinović, only disguised, in order to protect his unsuspecting uncle in the land of 'Latins, the old deceivers') joins the royal horses, the Tsar's guards are ready to beat up its impertinent master. Dušan, however, does not allow this:

"Do not strike him, that young Bulgarian,"¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ 'Те се на то једва смиловао,/ Смиловао свети Аранђеле.' *Како се крсно име служи in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 74, my emphasis.*

¹⁴⁷ *Наход Момир in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 119.*

¹⁴⁸ Holton and Mihailovich translate 'Бугарче' as 'Bulgarian', but, although this is indeed a correct literal translation of the word, it is not entirely clear whether the singer really meant 'a Bulgarian', or used the noun to simply designate 'a shepherd'. In Serbian folk tradition, Bulgarians were

for he has learnt to sleep, that young Bulgar,
while guarding sheep, high up in the mountains.
Don't strike at him but wake him up instead."¹⁴⁹

[“Не удрите млађано Бугарче,
Бугарче се спават’ научило
По планини овце чувајући;
Не удрите, већ га пробудите.”]¹⁵⁰

Later, when the lowly ‘young Bulgarian’ proves to be the Tsar’s only champion willing and capable of fulfilling the treacherous tasks the Latins (living up to their reputation) set up, Dušan offers more than a mere pocket reward. He exhibits fatherly concern for the brave, but apparently inexperienced and hopeless-looking shepherd, and takes upon himself to instruct him in the matters of knightly combat. Surprisingly, the ‘young Bulgarian’ stubbornly holds onto his shepherd habits. This, of course, occasions some very effective comic scenes. After Dušan already (unsuccessfully) tries to advise the shepherd about the correct way to carry a lance, he now points out how difficult it would be for the youth to leap over three horses wearing his clumsy overcoat:

“But do take off that Bulgarian cloak.
May God punish the unskilful tailor
who made for you that heavy shepherd’s cloak.”
Then he replied, Miloš Voinović:
“Not to worry; just drink your cool red wine,
[...] For if the sheep is troubled by its own fleece,
there is neither sheep, nor the fleece to speak of.”¹⁵¹

[“Него скини Бугар-кабаницу,
Бог убио онога терзију,
Који ти је толику срезао!”
Говори му Милош Воиновић:
“Сједи, царе, пак пиј рујно вино,
Не брини се мојом кабаницом;
[...] Којој овци своје руно смета,

immediately associated with this occupation, and it may have happened that by metonymic extension the very word ‘Bulgarian’ came to signify ‘shepherd’.

¹⁴⁹ *The Wedding of Tsar Dušan in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁰ *Женидба Душанова in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 107.

¹⁵¹ *The Wedding of Tsar Dušan*, pp. 63 - 64.

After this episode, the Tsar stops offering advice, only his sincere commiseration at the youth's further trials. These scenes do warm us to Dušan, but the singer does not let us entirely forget the Tsar's great injustice towards his nephews. The last lines of the poem are the singer's warning against venturing anywhere without one's 'kith and kin', and the last words he allots to Dušan are the words of regret which are not given any relief by some kind of a pardon Miloš might have offered his uncle. After the shared successful adventure, the uncle and the nephew still go their separate ways.

Just like with Haraldr Finehair in the sagas of Icelanders, the reader/listener of the Serbian epic poetry is left to negotiate Dušan's good and bad characteristics, which are always left slightly at odds, and, almost as in a Cubist painting, never allowed to merge into one another and form a unified, monolithic portrait. In addition, and again just like with Haraldr and the emigration to Iceland, the finger of blame for the dissolution of the Empire is not firmly pointed at Dušan. Undoubtedly, as we have seen, he is presented as an embodiment of might whose vitality (and ultimately the vitality of his country and people) is being drained through his sinful behaviour. At the same time, he is not made the villain. In actual fact, it seems more surprising that he is not made into a victim, for in almost all of the discussed poems he is as much a prey of the scheming and factioning magnates as a victim of his own corrupted nature. If he does not invite his nephews to the wedding, it is to oblige his future in-laws whose slanders he took for truth; if he does not choose a wife for his worthy cup-bearer, Lazar, it is because he has his sights set on nothing less than noble Milica of the proud Jugović family, who feel themselves so strong that, once

¹⁵² *Женидба Душанова*, p. 112.

the Tsar musters courage and mentions the match, they are ready to cut him in pieces. In *Momir the Foundling* it is the Tsar's highest official, his best men and the godfather of his children, consorting with the rest of the envious nobility, that makes slanderous remarks about the allegedly incestuous love between Dušan's daughter and his foster son and even stages a scene which proves to be the end of Momir, but ultimately of Dušan's daughter too for she commits suicide. And, in *How to Honour Slava*, it is only, taken by the generally congenial atmosphere, and on the good-natured coaxing of his courtiers, that the Tsar joins them at the table.

Rather than making the Tsar or his courtiers either victims or villains, the guilt for the demise of the medieval Serbia is not clearly determined, but left scattered across the webs of their relationships. As important nodes that make up the imposing structure of the Empire, these people are also the joints at which it will disintegrate, and the whole lavish atmosphere at the court is presented as infested with treachery and duplicity to which nobody is immune – it is overpowering. It is as though what is the making of the powerful Serbia, is at the same time its unmaking.

Furthermore, the slow but sure erosion of the state is not felt only in Dušan's rule, it is already intuited in the two poems about St. Sava mentioned at the beginning of this section. When I said that they represent little more than eulogies to the Nemanjić dynasty, 'little' was not a mere litotes. It refers to what prompts Sava into defending his father's investments in the first place – the rumours, speculations, the underlying suspicion and distrust of the nobles. It occupies only a few lines, but nevertheless forcefully points to the decay in the bud of what will, under Dušan's rule, manage to blossom into an empire. And, most famously, the discord, greed, jealousies that involve close kin, are brought to boil after Dušan's death. In *Uroš and*

the Mrljavčevićs, his weak heir is deeply embroiled in a dispute over the throne with the haughty Mrnjavčević brothers:

Tsars are grappling over the tsardom,
One another they want to dispatch,
pierce one another with their golden knives,
And they do not know who is to succeed.¹⁵³

[Цареви се отимљу о царство,
Међу се се хоће да поморе,
Злаћенима да пободу ножи,
А не знаду на коме је царство.]¹⁵⁴

It is seldom the case that a singer would confuse the honorific titles of his epic personae, and, since the singer of *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs* is, later in the poem, careful enough to address his characters as ‘king Vukašin’, ‘duke Uglješa’, etc., it only remains to interpret the first quoted line as his deliberate, ascorbic jab. The singer addresses the contenders here as ‘tsars’, mocking the fact that these mere would-be-tsars already see themselves as such, even before the succession is announced. The conflict among them is open enough, but all four lords secretly dispatch their heralds to Prizren to seek out the archpriest Nedeljko, each in hope that Dušan’s confessor will, whether justly or out of sheer fear, rule in their favour. How urgent the matter is, how great the greed, can be seen from the fact that these heralds do not have the decency to let the archpriest finish his service, but enter the church on horseback and force him with their whips to cut the service short. Without a genuine respect for the faith, the Church, or each other, the four lords are, ironically,

¹⁵³ Holton and Mihailovich offer a more poetic translation:

The four great lords fight over the kingdom,
Among themselves they want to start a war,
Kill each other there with their golden knives,
For they don’t know whose is the royal crown. (*Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs in: Holton, and Mihailovich, Songs*, p. 71.) However, the irony of addressing the contenders as ‘tsars’, and the violence of the language are slightly lost. That is why I opted here for my more literal, though admittedly clumsier, translation.

¹⁵⁴ *Урош и Мрљавчевићи in: Караџић, Vol II, p. 141.*

impeccable in keeping up appearances and decorum, for, after Marko Kraljević in the end comes to judge their dispute, we are told that

All the nobles come to liturgy.
When the service of liturgy has ended,
They all come out of the stately white church,
And they sit down at the tables in front,
eating sugar and drinking cool *raki*.¹⁵⁵

[Сва господа дошла на јутрење,
У цркви су службу савршили,
Изљегоше из бијеле цркве,
У столове пред цркву сједнули,
Шећер ију, а ракију пију,]¹⁵⁶

In further irony, the whole dispute is placed on the field of Kosovo, making the listeners wonder whether the famous battle was lost in this dispute already, before Prince Lazar and his host even had the chance of engaging in it. The fearless and just Marko rules in favour of the rightful successor, Dušan's son Uroš (prophetically called 'the Weak'), and order gets restored in this, just as in all the poems mentioned earlier, but reluctantly so, its thin crust only masking the surface of the volcano that is about to erupt with full force. For, the Turks appear on the horizon of this epic landscape, heralds of the 'last times', God's scourge.

b) Great national tragedies and great human comedies

Poems concerning the Kosovo battle itself seemingly introduce two straightforward reasons for the failure of the Christian warriors to defend Serbia against the Muslim invaders. One is the infamous treachery of Vuk Branković, and the other Prince Lazar's choice of the everlasting heavenly kingdom over the transient earthly one. The very fact, however, that there are two reasons rather than one, already renders

¹⁵⁵ *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 76.

¹⁵⁶ *Урош и Мрљавчевићи*, p. 145.

any determinism problematic, and especially so, as the two explanations do not necessarily depend one on another. It is very likely that the motives of treason and sacrifice hark back to the Bible, but in the Kosovo poems, they feel more contradictory than complementary. *The Fall of the Serbian Empire* opens rather strikingly, with St. Elias in the shape of a hawk carrying a swallow in his beak. The swallow is actually the letter from the Holy Virgin in which she leaves the outcome of the battle in the hands of the Serbian leader, offering him either victory and an earthly kingdom, or defeat and an everlasting kingdom in Heaven. Lazar's difficult, but also obvious choice should apparently have sealed the outcome of the battle, yet, after the warlike feats of the Serbian warriors are catalogued, the poem ends with the singer almost surprised, and exclaiming in aggravation:

Prince Lazar then, would overwhelm the Turks,
But may God's curse be on Vuk Branković!
for he betrays his prince and his wife's father;¹⁵⁷

[Тад' би Лаза надвладао Турке,
Бог убио Вука Бранковића!
Он издаде таста на Косову;]¹⁵⁸

The nineteenth-century French writer, Saint-Réne Taillandier, finds in addition the 'woeful tone' of the Kosovo poems at odds with Lazar's free-willed choice and its ultimate optimism, but delightfully so. Furthermore, the inconsistency is for him poignant, as well as enriching:

Moving contradictions of the singer, vivid picture of the feelings
that are stirring within him! He¹⁵⁹ thinks up for his brethren a
superhuman consolation, and in the moment of describing it, he too
is in need of a consolation. How many things there are, in fact, in
that epic fresco!¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ *The Fall of the Serbian Empire in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 150.

¹⁵⁸ *Пронаст царства српскога in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 216.

¹⁵⁹ Incidentally, at least for one of the poems that Saint-Réne Taillandier refers to, *The Fall of the Serbian Empire*, we know that the singer was actually a she – 'The blind woman from Grgurevci'.

¹⁶⁰ This is my translation of Serbian translation by Mihailo B. Pavlović: 'Dirljive protivrečnosti pesnikove, živa slika osećanja koja se u njemu kovitlaju! On za svoju braću izmislija natčovečansku

How many indeed, and not all down to the complex interplay of the complementarity and contradiction of the two ultimate 'reasons' for the Kosovo defeat, or the force of the singers' competing emotions. Actually, one of the Kosovo poems' especially enriching ingredients is the fact that the singers resist petrifying the past into an 'epic fresco'. The already lively defeat-dynamic is further amplified by the inclusion of another element, an element as powerful if not as overt as the treason/sacrifice 'explanations', and all-too-familiar: the ever-present and the all-pervasive discord among the Serbian nobility. Lazar's inability to control the self-willed Jugovićes in the second variant of *Building of Ravanica*, their cowardice in *Banović Strahinja*, the trust and respect blindly given to the lords whose only merit is that they are rich and powerful, and the humiliation of the faithful warriors, all echo the discords we already encountered in the poems about Tsar Dušan. Rather than giving *the* reason for the dissolution of the Empire and the defeat at Kosovo, the epic singer offers *reasons*, which enter into a vigorous dialogue.

Another quality of the Kosovo poems that resists the petrification of the past is the fact that the feelings expressed by the singers are more than simply 'woeful'. Just as in the poems relating the events before the Kosovo battle, the singers' perspective is often tinged with either well-meant humour, or bitter, sardonic jabs. Vuk Branković might be dramatically singled out to bear the brunt of being a traitor, but neither are the protagonist participants in the battle left entirely unblemished, or spiritually unreachable in their heroism and their choice of martyrdom. Even the

utehu, a u trenutku kada je opisuje u svojim stihovima, I njemu samom potrebna je uteha. Koliko stvari, uostalom, u toj epskoj fresci!' (Pavlović, Mihailo. *Od pogleda do teksta: antologija francuskih tekstova o jugoslovenskim krajevima i narodima. Izbor, uvodni tekstovi, prevod i komentari*. Beograd: Narodna Knjiga, 1983, p. 423.) The original French text goes as follows: 'Touchantes contradictions du poète, vive image des sentiments qui l'agitent! Il invente pour ses frères une consolation surhumaine, et au moment où il la décrit en ses vers, il a besoin lui-même d'être console. Que de choses d'ailleurs dans ce tableau épique!' (*Ibid.*, p. 185.)

Christ-like figure of Prince Lazar succumbs to this. For all his spiritual perfection, Lazar is occasionally viewed as something of an upstart¹⁶¹ and a slightly gullible man. In *The Prince's Supper* (*Кнежева вечера*),¹⁶² during his very own 'last supper', Lazar, unlike Christ, does not recognise the real traitor. In a mock toast, he accuses instead the one who has always served him faithfully – the ultimate hero of the Kosovo poems and the vanquisher of the Turkish sultan, Miloš Obilić.¹⁶³ Devastated yet calm, Miloš graciously accepts Lazar's toast but bitterly denies the slander, promising to kill the Turkish sultan:

“I have never been unfaithful to you,
I've never been, nor will I ever be.
For tomorrow I plan to give my life
For Christian faith there on Kosovo field. [...]
Tomorrow is the bright St. Vitus Day.
We shall then see there on Kosovo field
who is faithful and who is a traitor.
[...] I will kill the Turkish tsar, Murad,
and I will stand with my foot on his throat.”¹⁶⁴

[“Ја неvjера никад био нисам,
Нит' сам био, нити ћу кад бити;
Него сјутра мислим у Косову
За ришћанску вјеру погинути; [...]
Сјутра јесте лијеп Видов данак,
Виђећемо у пољу Косову,
Ко је вјера, ко ли је неvjера.
Ја ћу отић' сјутра у Косово,
И заклаћу Турског цар-Мурата,
И стаћу му ногом под гр'оце.”]¹⁶⁵

What seems to be a typical heroic boast is given firmer psychological and moral grounds. The hero's motivation to clear his name and prove his loyalty is intertwined with his determination to fight for the causes (even if lost) that he perceives as higher than the promotion of his own person: 'the honourable cross' and freedom.

¹⁶¹ See both variants of *Зиданье Раванице* in: Караџић, Vol. II, pp. 147-149 and pp. 150-156.

¹⁶² This is how one of the larger *Fragments of Various Kosovo Songs* is dubbed.

¹⁶³ Miloš's place at Lazar's table always tends to be lowly. (Again, see the two variants of *Зиданье Раванице*.)

¹⁶⁴ *Fragments of Various Kosovo Songs* in: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁵ *Комади од различнијех косовскијех пјесама* in: Караџић, Vol. II, pp. 225-226.

However, the magnitude of the moment and the impending disaster of which all seated at Lazar's supper are consciously about to partake, are not overplayed. What immediately follows Miloš's serene words is his comical threat to the suspected slanderer and the real traitor – Vuk Branković:

“I will tie him onto my fighting spear,
as a woman ties yarn onto distaff;
Then I'll take him out on Kosovo field.”¹⁶⁶

[“Везаћу га уз то бојно копље,
Као жена куђељ' уз преслицу,
Носићу га у поље Косово.”]¹⁶⁷

This almost farcical scene which forces us to imagine a great hero as a peasant woman and his serpentine adversary as a harmless bobble of wool, masterfully adds to the palpability of Miloš's character, but consequently, the whole setting becomes more lifelike, less alienating. In his interpretation of the scene, Svetozar Koljević emphasises the importance of this ‘comic imaginative vitality’ as a vehicle that ‘dispels the nightmarish illusion of the omnipotence of fraud and violence, the illusion which a pure tragedy often creates’.¹⁶⁸ Though indisputable, the greatness and despair of Miloš's sacrifice, the tragic outcome of the battle and its actors, never descend to pathos.

* * *

The past in the sagas and Serbian epics is alluring and persuasive because of the open-endedness with which it emerges. It does not come through protruding like a monolith whose smooth edges make the presence of the designer conspicuous, but it is not chaotic and without a structure either. The structure emerges out of the

¹⁶⁶ *Fragments of Various Kosovo Songs*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁷ *Комади од различнијех косовскијех пјесама*, p. 226.

¹⁶⁸ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 166.

dynamics of the saga/Serbian epic tradition, yet the much-admired aura of documentary that the two literatures radiate is not achieved because disparate matter is blended tidily, but precisely because loose ends and contradictions are not tampered with. This richness of texture produces a persuasive account which need not be accurate, but which certainly agrees with our aesthetic expectations of what 'real' and 'natural' are supposed to be. To be sure, such expectations sometimes lead us to behave like a canary as it flies into the wallpaper depicting a forest. This is a danger no one is entirely immune to whenever they set off in search of facts, and regardless of whether the search is conducted within the so-called factual or the so-called fictional accounts. Although there is much to be said for the canary – for instance, how reliance on its expectations is well justified by evolution and how banging its head teaches it to adjust and modify them – we are satisfied to note that in this inquiry it is not the facts we were after, but rather the ways in which out of the sagas'/Serbian epics' multitude of crosscurrent perspectives and a medley of authenticating devices an arresting image of the past emerges, the complexity and liveliness of which keep doubt at bay.

IV

Domestication of Heroes and Heroisation of Domestics in the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry

4.1 *The Complex Dynamics of Characterisation*

a) Emerging from the epic horizon of expectations:¹ the relationship with inherited literary models

Heroes such as Beowulf, Roland, Grettir the Strong and Marko Kraljević all seem to occupy the same context of medieval epic literature, yet the differences in the way the characters of the former two and the latter two are wrought are profound.²

Although all of them share some basic heroic features (super-human strength, courage and pride), Beowulf and Roland are markedly more determined, single-minded, unbending and, therefore, more one-dimensional. I do not wish to suggest that the authors of *Beowulf* or *The Song of Roland* used a strictly black-and-white palette while creating their characters. Beowulf and Roland are, of course, heroes *par excellence*, but they are not conceived as flawless. During his eulogy upon Beowulf's slaying of Grendel's mother, king Hrothgar finds it necessary to warn the young Geat about the dangers of pride and hunger for power. Similarly, Roland's arrogance and haughtiness are bitterly reprimanded by his ever-faithful Oliver. Close as he may be to the gods, a hero is still human: he is vulnerable and fallible. This is recognised by the creators of *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland*.

¹ See Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Brighton: Harvester, 1982.

² For a useful survey of works drawing connections between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*, see Liberman, Anatoly. 'Beowulf – Grettir' in: Bela Brogyanyi and Thomas Krömmelbein, eds. *Germanic Dialects: Linguistic and Philological Investigations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986, pp. 353-401. For a recent challenge to scholarship endorsing such connections, see Magnús Fjalldal. *The Long Arm of Coincidence: the Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis Saga*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

However, we could hardly imagine Beowulf (or Roland) sitting in a tavern, drinking wine with his horse, and (at least for a while) patiently receiving his enemy's blows, laughing them off with the words: 'Don't wake the fleas in my fur' ('Не буди ми по кожуху буха');³ or in a slapstick erotic situation in which a maid stares at his unimpressive loins, wondering jocundly at the disproportion of what she sees and the greatness of the hero.⁴ These scenes do not befit Beowulf. They are not too frequent in the sagas and the Serbian epics either, but for all their extremity, they do nothing to belittle the kind of heroism that Marko Kraljević and Grettir the Strong stand for. Not for a moment does the audience doubt that Marko will have the head of Filip the Hungarian by the end of the poem and the prompt divergence of *Grettis saga* from the saucy episode with the servant girl to the solemn tribute to another of the hero's feats seems unnecessarily cautious, even comical in its own right: 'When word got around that Grettir had swum four miles, everyone was full of admiration for his feats both on land and at sea' ('En er þat fréttisk, at Grettir hafði lagzk viku sjávar, þótti öllum frábærr frœknleikr hans bæði á sjá ok landi').⁵

Marko and Grettir match Beowulf's prowess but have more apparent flaws (Marko's violent rashness, the stain of his vassal bondage; Grettir's arrogance and cruel disposition). At the same time, they possess some nobler qualities than Beowulf does. Despite his unmatched strength, Grettir is a relatively moderate man who knows his limitations. He can fight up to four people at one time, not more if there is a choice, he admits.⁶ In terms of heroic literature where single-handed heroes kill enemies in their hundreds (e.g. Roland decimating the Saracens, or Siegfried cutting

³ *Марко Краљевић и Филип Маџарин in: Караџић, Вук Стефановић. Српске народне пјесме. Vol. II, Београд: Просвета, 1976, p. 255.*

⁴ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong in: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Bernard Scudder, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. II, p. 165; Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar. Guðni Jónsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit 1936, Vol. VII, p. 239.*

⁵ *Grettir's Saga, p. 166; Grettis saga, p. 241.*

⁶ *Grettir's Saga, p.99; Grettis saga, p. 107.*

his way through countless Saxons and Danes), this estimate is more than modest. Beowulf's mission in Denmark can be perceived as that of mercy mainly in terms of a convenient circumstance. His main motive is to prove his own worth ('inspired again by the thought of glory'⁷) and to firmly establish himself as a hero, a prince and a leader. Marko, on the other hand, rarely fights to try out and display his strength in pursuit of personal prosperity. He is the champion of the weak and helpless and can easily be moved to tears by the suffering of another, be it a human or an animal. Finally, both Marko and Grettir are given a sense of humour and wit, the quality that heroes of the earlier epics rarely possess⁸ and when they do, as is the case with Archbishop Turpin in *Roland*, it is usually directed at the enemy. 'The news for you is, you are dead',⁹ shouts the boisterous clergyman at an unsuspecting Saracen. What distinguishes Grettir and Marko is the fact that they are capable of being the butt of the joke too.

Whence do these differences come?

As has been noted in previous chapters, the complex accumulative texturing and the *heteroglossia* inherent in the oral medium (and carried over into oral-derived written texts) are in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics further supported by the weakness of the socio-historical centripetal forces that normally impede, or rather channel, impose themselves onto, the evolutionary processes (i.e. the distributed author) by which traditional works of verbal art come into being. With no individual (e.g. the king, the patron, the pope) or an institution (e.g. centralised state, court, the Church) in charge of the saga/Serbian epic production, it becomes difficult to impose a particular ideology, smoothen the creases of contestation and dissent, and take away the potentially embarrassing features that a hero acquires on his long

⁷ *Beowulf*. Seamus Heaney, transl. London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 84.

⁸ Humour is usually the domain of the 'low' comical figures such as Thersites in *Iliad*, not heroes.

⁹ *The Song of Roland*. C. H. Sisson, transl. Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1983, p. 52.

evolutionary journey, forced to serve different (sometimes contrasting) purposes and fit in the roles that different generations of audiences at different times required from him. With no social force strong enough to ensure the purity of the 'high' genre of epic, the Bakhtinian destabilising (centrifugal) carnivalesque elements, the 'low' genres of comedy and satire, flow into the epic, permitting 'excursions' into areas beyond the narrow context of traditional heroism. These excursions enable the emergence of the less deterministic, more complex and multi-layered (i.e. realistic) characters, with features that do not always harmoniously complement each other, but rather clash or are left without final definition.

b) Different audience, different characters

The Turkish invasion and subjugation of Serbia and Iceland's pending subordination to the Norwegian king had produced fertile soil for the continuation of the relevance of heroic literature, but under entirely different conditions: the traditionally aristocratic genre of epic changed hands and in many ways became the epic of the peasants. Despite the fact that the chieftains are the most prominent characters in the sagas of Icelanders, and that Serbian epics largely keep old feudal lords as leading men, in comparison with earlier heroic literature, Icelandic sagas and Serbian epic poetry are hugely democratised genres – they appealed to audiences across the societies' layers, the borders between these layers not too sharp themselves.¹⁰ If, as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen¹¹ envisages, the sagas' primary venue was a chieftain's household, or the Althing,¹² so the epic songs of Serbia were intended for

¹⁰ See chapter 1, especially pp. 14–15.

¹¹ See Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1993, p. 130.

¹² The Althing was the national assembly which met every June at Thingvellir. There, Vésteinn Ólason notes, 'a legal assembly of sorts debated and decided new laws and changes to existing laws'.

village cottages and for Church assemblies and holidays. This shift of focus from aristocratic towards peasant audience, must have warranted a change in the portrayal of heroes.

Although often more valued than life in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems, the fundamental epic concept of honour still underwent transformations. According to Theodore Andersson, these are in the sagas perceptible in terms of ‘the replacement of a warrior ideal with a social ideal’,¹³ and Jovan Brkić notes that Serbian ‘[...] patriarchal society inherited ideas about personal honor and dignity from the feudal society, but it struck off all class distinctions connected with them’.¹⁴ Icelandic sagas differentiate between self-serving pride and the maintenance of personal/family integrity, both belonging to different ends of the term’s spectrum of meaning. Subsequently, temperance and moderation are the preferred characteristics of a hero to uncompromising self-assertion, showmanship of prowess and blind thirst for revenge as the only way of reestablishing one’s stained honour. In Serbian epics down-to-earth peasant pragmatism enters what was once the realm of aristocratic idealism: even as important an avenger figure as Marko Kraljević is allowed to get scared and avoid conflict where possible. New times call for new measures: a hero needs to have the sense to keep his head on his shoulders at the expense of pride so that, when in a position to do so, he can save more lives and rectify more injustices. The fact of vassalage in the case of Serbian epics and the impending loss of independence in the case of the sagas have created a new dimension to the concept, as the maintenance of one’s honour from the position of a subject had to be

(Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998, p.26).

¹³ Andersson, Theodore M. ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas.’ *Speculum*, 1970, 45, p. 592.

¹⁴ Brkić, Jovan. *Moral Concepts in Traditional Serbian Epic Poetry*. The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1961, p. 106.

fundamentally different from the maintenance of one's honour from the position of power. As opposed to the epics that are most commonly written from the perspective of historical winners, with their self-satisfying sense of closure and determinism, David Quint notes that the epics of historical losers

valorize the very contingency and open-endedness that the victors' epic disparages: the defeated hope for a different future to their story that the victors may think they have ended once and for all.¹⁵

It is this open-ended perception of history that contributes to the realism of Quint's 'losers' epics' or 'epics of survival'¹⁶ as Jeremy Downes calls them. Furthermore, unlike their victorious counterparts whose pursuit of honour and glory is seldom wrought with difficult moral choices, heroes in 'loser epics' are made to recognise that 'this is life, a thing of compromise'¹⁷ and so forced into 'heroically enduring the narcissistic injury'.¹⁸ Consequently, rather than a monolithic structure of a concept, honour is in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry a complex with a great variety of shades.

As much as heroes needed to stay heroes: models of physical strength and moral integrity, they were only partially idealised and had to resemble the peasant audience in order to be identifiable with and hence relevant. Icelandic heroes such as Egill, Gunnarr, Gísli could all be seen engaging in manual labour, cultivating their farms. Celebrated Serbian outlaws are ex-peasants who often relate their stories of hard toil before they were forced to outlawry by Turkish oppression. If a nobleman is

¹⁵ Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 9. Quint rightly warns against romanticising the historical losers in these epics. Referring to Ercilla's *Araucana* (an epic about the Spanish conquest of Chile), he comments: '[...] the losers who attract our sympathies today would be – had they only the power – the victors tomorrow. This realism is not cynical but hard-earned, and it plays against another idea [...], that those who have been victimized losers in history somehow have the right to become victimizing winners, in turn'. (Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 18.)

¹⁶ Downes, Jeremy M. *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1997, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

to remain the peasants' champion (as it is the case with Prince Marko), than he needs to be acceptable to this audience. In *The Ploughing of Marko Kraljević*, the mother of the hero, the queen, is complaining of having had enough of washing her son's bloodied shirts and asks him to pursue a more peaceful way of earning bread: ploughing and sowing rather than fighting. Marko seemingly obeys her, but instead of ploughing valleys and hills as he was advised, he chooses Turkish highways. Some Turks appear with three loads of gold and after a humorous repetition of the exchange: "Marko, stop ploughing up our roads!" / "Turks, stop trampling on my fields!"¹⁹ ("Моје Марко, не ори друмова," / Моје Турци, не газ'те орања"),²⁰ our hero finally loses patience, kills the Turks with his plough and takes the treasure to his mother Jevrosima: "This is what I ploughed up for you today" ("То сам тебе данас изорао").²¹ Of course, in terms of strict historical verisimilitude, this is a gross anachronism: a queen does not wash shirts, and there is no way of making Marko plough. Yet besides its comic overtones, there is still something very realistic about this scene: the realities of the singer and his hero merge. Like Jevrosima, the mother of another famous hero, the Icelandic Víga-Glúmr (his ancestors are Norwegian nobles), is also anxious for her son to do some work. But when he finally agrees to go haymaking, his mother is suspicious:

"You're dressing up a bit too much for going haymaking, my son."
He replied: "I don't often go to work but when I do I'll get a lot done and be well equipped for it too."²²

[“Mjök vandar þú nú, sonr minn, búning til heyverksins.” Hann svarar: “Eigi fer ek opt til at vinna, en bæði skal þá gera mikit at ok búask vel til, ok kann ek þó ekki vel til verksins at skipa [...].”]²³

¹⁹ My translation here is based on *The Ploughing of Marko Kraljević in*: Locke, Geoffrey N. W. transl. *The Serbian Epic Ballads*. Belgrade: Nolit, 1997, p. 217, but is closer to the original. Neither Locke nor I were able to translate the word 'моје' with which each exchange starts and which has an overtone of a threat.

²⁰ *Орање Марка Краљевића in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 313.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

²² *Killer-Glúmr's Saga in*: Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. John McKinnell, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997, Vol. II, p. 279.

Indeed, the finely dressed Víga-Glúmr heads for the hayfield but with no intention of doing some haymaking: it is there that he takes his vengeance on Sigmundur Porkelsson. Earth nourished on blood, daily jobs and slaughter, humour and affliction, go hand in hand in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry and this gives them their distinct flavour. And while on the one hand, as Vésteinn Ólason notes, ‘domestication of their surroundings detracts from the overall heroic impression’,²⁴ on the other, it is precisely this ‘domestication of surroundings’ (effectively, the domestication of heroes) that contributes to the sense of immediacy and the air of realism with which both the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems are endowed.

Contrasting aspects of life, its everyday character and its capacity for the momentous, its dialectics of the tragical and the comical, the aristocratic and the democratic, all merge in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry. The humour and irony in which the two literatures abound support rather than undermine this complexity inasmuch as these qualities (rare in earlier heroic literature) presuppose a critical view of the subject. The effect on characterisation of mixing ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres is that a hero retains his dignity on the whole, but is not an awesome, untouchable figure, while, in turn, the supporting cast of characters (villains, female roles, ‘lowly’ characters of servants and slaves) gain in stature and are graced with characteristics usually reserved for heroes. The next two sections will take a closer look at these complex figures of emergent realism.

²³ *Víga-Glúms saga in: Eyfirdinga sögur*. Jónas Kristjánsson, ed. Íslensk fornrit, 1956, Vol. IX, p. 27.

²⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 146.

4.2 Heroes or protagonists? The case of Marko Kraljević and Grettir the Strong

In my previous work²⁵ I examined a variety of corresponding Icelandic saga and Serbian epic characters, ranging from the heroes *par excellence* that closely adhere to the earlier medieval models, such as *Laxdæla saga*'s princely Kjartan and Kosovo cycle's solemn Boško Jugović, over those that clearly move away from the tradition, such as the gentle and humane Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Banović Strahinja, to the most unlikely heroes, the lawman Njáll and the outlaw Vujadin (two old men who choose stoicism as an alternative kind of heroism). However, the complex processes and dynamics involved in crafting the saga/Serbian epic characters (the processes and dynamics that lead to emergent realism) culminate in Marko Kraljević and Grettir the Strong.

In many ways Marko and Grettir are better described by the term 'anti-hero' than 'hero'. Their physical appearance, their tempestuous nature and their very personal reading of the heroic code, markedly diverge from the heroes one encounters in most of epic literature. Yet, if one were to choose a character, an icon to represent Serbian epic poetry, it would most certainly be Marko Kraljević, the only hero to boast a whole cycle of poems dedicated to him. As far as the sagas of Icelanders go, Grettir would have to struggle for supremacy because of the voluminousness and diversity of their content, but his iconic presence within the genre is indisputable.²⁶ The authority of the celebrated Sturla the Lawspeaker²⁷ is invoked at the end of *Grettir's Saga* precisely for this purpose:

²⁵ See my MA thesis: *Marko Kraljević Meets Grettir the Strong: A Comparative Study of Serbian Epic Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders*. MA. Thesis. University of Nottingham, 2001.

²⁶ For an interesting study of Grettir's iconicity in Icelandic culture, see: Hastrup, Kirsten. 'Tracing tradition: an anthropological perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*' in: Lindow, John *et al.*, eds. *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, Odense: Odense University Press, 1986, pp. 281-313.

²⁷ Sturla Thordarsson (1214-84) was one of the greatest authors in thirteenth century Iceland.

Sturla the Lawspeaker has said that he does not consider any outlaw to have been as distinguished as Grettir the Strong. [...] he regards him as the wisest, since he spent the longest time in outlawry of any man [...] he was the strongest man in Iceland among his contemporaries [...] unlike any other Iclander, he was avenged in Constantinople [...].²⁸

[Hefir Sturla lögmaðr svá sagt, at engi sekr maðr þykkir honum jafnmikill fyrir sér hafa verit sem Grettir inn sterki. [...] honum þykkir hann vitrastr verit hafa, því at hann hefir verit lengst í skeð einnhverr manna [...] hann var sterkastr á landinu sinna jafnaldra [...] hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði, sem einskis annars íslenzks manns [...].]²⁹

Transgression against the classical medieval heroic ideal becomes transparent in the characters of Marko and Grettir. A hero is not a paragon of virtue, but is viewed against the complexities of life, as a human being, albeit exceptional, capable of a range of behaviour: with exemplary virtues and with exemplary vices. If his sense of honour is not too prudish to prevent him from resorting to wit and trickery against a great force, he is all the more likely to appeal to a wider audience who, aware of the limitations of their own power, easily identify with his survivalist pragmatism. And especially so if his prodigal strength and outbursts of violence are carefully balanced with his capacity for altruism and his comical lightness of being.

Although some of the poems refer to Marko as handsome, or handsome enough (*Sister of Leka the Captain*, or *The Wedding of Marko Kraljević*), it is the portrait that the daughter-in-law of Vuča General paints that sticks as Marko's epic image, despite the fact that her fear influences the mood of her palette:

“Hark, my father, Vuča General!
There's a hero sitting in the wide field,
he's stubbed his lance into the ground,
and to the lance he tied his horse,
in front of him, there's a tub of wine; [...] half of it drinks he, half he gives to the horse;
The horse is not as the horses are,
but spotted, rather like a cow;

²⁸ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 191.

²⁹ *Grettis saga*, pp. 289-290.

the hero too, is not as heroes are:
on his back there's a cape made of wolf-skin
and on his head a wolf-skin cap [...]
there's something black clasped 'tween his teeth,
as big as a half-year-old lamb."

["О мој свекре, Вуча генерале!
Сједи јунак у пољу широку,
У ледину копље ударио,
За копље је коња привезао,
А пред њиме стоји тулум вина; [...]
Пола пије, пола коњу даје;
Коњ му није каквино су коњи,
Веће шарен, како и говече
Јунак није какви су јунаци:
На плећима ћурак од курјака,
На глави му капа од курјака, [...]
Нешто црно држи у зубима
Колик' јагње од пола године."]³⁰

The hero is as comical as he is terrifying. Marko's epic exploits are set in the post-Kosovo era, after the country has completely succumbed to Turkish power. There is not much of the aristocratic grandeur left to invest him with: not much of the brocade and velvet that enfold Strahinjić Ban, or Boško Jugović's dazzling golden splendour. It is not that Marko lacks wealth. In his long epic career he will be rewarded (or will confiscate) many a 'three loads of treasure' ('три товара блага'), and on special occasions such as his wedding for example, he is capable of looking smart, though never quite princely in his demeanour. His choice of relatively poor (if eccentric) clothing seems deliberate. Finery and the symbols of the powerful medieval state belong to the glorious past, not the humiliating actuality that is vassalage. Prince he might be, but Marko is also a Turkish servant, and in that not much different from his own subjects. The stress is, therefore, not too strong on his noble lineage, but skills and inner virtues (and vices) that do not require rich and bright clothing to shine through. And even though there are times Marko's rage is stirred when addressed as 'a pauper dervish' (*Marko Kraljević and Filip the Hungarian*), it is precisely this

³⁰ *Марко Краљевић и Вуча генерал in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 182.*

kind of look that often delights him, since it fools his enemies into slighting and scornfully underestimating him, making his last laugh all the sweeter. And for Marko, humour is as valued a weapon as his celebrated mace.

In *Marko Kraljević and the Arab* Marko saves the Sultan's daughter from being forced to marry a rapacious and overbearing outlaw. He meets the poor girl ready to jump into a lake, lamenting her fate with the words: "I will marry you, lake/ Better you than the cursed Arab" ("Удаћу се за тебе, језеро,/ Волим за те, него за Арапа").³¹ As she has never seen Marko before, but only listened to the stories of his valour that her imagination must have connected with a glorious appearance, the girl fails to recognise the great hero in the humble stranger. Feeling let down by Marko whom she had entreated for help, writing him a letter with her blood, she does not have any patience with the inquisitiveness of the stranger and dismisses him with the familiar insult: "Let me be, you pauper dervish! Why ask, when you cannot help?" ("Прођи ме се, гола дервишино!/ Што ме питаш кад помоћ' не можеш?").³² Just as his deliberately deceptive appearance (the tactic all too familiar to Víga-Glúmr, Egill and Grettir) tricks the girl whom he set off to rescue, it will also lull his mighty opponent into overconfidence. After receiving a report about a stranger attacking his wedding party (the report includes an exact replica of the description that Vuča General's daughter-in-law offered), the Arab does not merely vent his rage by threatening to kill Marko, he feels the need to humiliate him too:

"Bad luck, unknown warrior!
What devil made you
come to my wedding party,
kill my best man and my witness?
Are you mad, or yet, very simple?
Are you so insolent that it went to your head?
Or you came to hate your very life?"

³¹ *Марко Краљевић и Арапин* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 282.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

I swear by my steadfast faith!
I'll tighten the reigns on my mare,
Seven times I'll jump over you,
Seven from this, seven from that side,
And then I'll slice your head off."

["Зла ти срећа, незнани јуначе!
Који те је ђаво навратио,
Да ти дођеш у моје сватове,
Да погубиш кума и ђевера?
Или си луд и ништа не знадеш?
Ил' си силан, пак си полудио?
Или ти је живот омрзнуо?
А тако ми моје вјере тврде!
Потегнућу дизген бедевији,
Седам ћу те пута прескочити,
Седам отуд, а седам одовуд,
Пак ћу онда тебе одсећ' главу."]³³

The Arab will not live up to his boast. Like his master, the piebald Šarac is not too courteous when ladies are in question: he bites at the mare's ear just as she tries to jump over him. The Arab too proves no match for Marko: the rescued girl would thus be returned to her father and in exchange for the Arab's head, Marko will be rewarded with treasure, including a seal confirming that nobody be allowed to dispatch Marko without first consulting his foster-father, the sultan. Even the fairy-tale happy ending is made conditional: there is still somebody above Marko, his heroism has its clear limitations.

Similar to Marko, the red-haired and freckle-faced Grettir is not exactly the picture of aristocratic perfection such as the blond and enchanting heroes of the *Laxdæla saga*, or Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. As a child he is described as 'handsome' ('fríðr'), but also 'very overbearing' ('mjök ódæll'), 'taciturn and rough, and mischievous in both word and deed' ('fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum').³⁴ These inner characteristics directly relate to Grettir's appearance: if we try to construct his image, however handsome, it will always be slightly

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 285-286.

³⁴ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 64; *Grettis saga*, p. 36.

compromised by his customary sardonic smile and frequent grinning. Unlike Gunnarr or Kjartan, Grettir is not given much chance to parade in scarlet tunics, golden arm-bracelets or Russian hats. Not that he is short of vanity and pride: as soon as he returns from Norway where he had spent the three years of his exile and where he had found fame and glory, he bedecks himself in foreign finery and goes to find the man who has, as a boy, humiliated him once in a ball-game. He does not simply want to avenge the humiliation by fighting Auðunn, he adorns himself richly to emphasise the difference between his 'heroic' nature and Auðunn's contemptible pursuit of dairy-farming. In a humorous twist, the sole incident that depicts Grettir smartly dressed ends with Auðunn's curds all over the hero's exquisite attire. Apart from this instance, Grettir's image is forever marked by a black cloak, by the need to hide. Upon his second return to Iceland, he learns that he has been outlawed, and from then on 'he took himself a black cowl which he wore over his clothes as a disguise' ('hann fekk sér svartan kufl ok steypði útan yfir klæði ok dulðisk svá').³⁵ What vassalage does for Marko, outlawry does for Grettir: it limits, or rather puts in perspective his otherwise boundless strength and possibly unrestrainable power. The clothing is accordingly less flamboyant. But, just as it is the case with Marko, Grettir does not bemoan his state: he rather exploits it and enjoys staging little humorous plays of his own mistaken identity. The encounter with the undead Glámr is preceded by Grettir wrapping himself 'with a shaggy fur cloak' ('röggvarfeld').³⁶ On another occasion, craving the company of people in the lonely years of outlawry, he joins their celebrations and sporting contests disguised in poor clothing, delighting in the

³⁵ *Grettir's saga*, p. 120; *Grettis saga*, p. 148.

³⁶ *Grettir's saga*, p. 105; *Grettis saga*, p. 119.

surprise procured by the people's underestimating him, by their judgment based on his appearance.³⁷

In the episode set in Norway in which the insolent Vikings come to Grettir's absent host's house with the intent of pillaging and raping the women of the household, Grettir does not attack them head-on, as would be customary with earlier medieval heroes, or the chivalric models. He rather resorts to trickery and uses his untrustworthy looks (Grettir's host harbours doubts against him ever since he was bound to offer him hospitality) to present himself to the Vikings as a merry rogue that intends to join their band. It is not only the Vikings that accept this immediately, without a shadow of a doubt, it is also Grettir's distressed hostess. Just as Marko allows for a while the Turkish princess to treat him as a mere 'pauper dervish', Grettir too (almost sadistically) delights in his hostess's misjudgment of him and her despair, offering her a little clue he knows she will not be able to interpret correctly:

"I don't rank them with masters or fine men," she replied, "because they are the worst robbers and evil-doers around.[...] And you're repaying Thorfinn badly for rescuing you from a shipwreck [...]."

"You would do better now to help the guests out of their wet clothes than to criticise me. You'll have plenty of chance to do that later."³⁸

[Hon svarar: "Ekki tel ek þá með bóndum eða góðum mönnum, því at þeir eru inir verstu ránsmenn ok illvirkjar; [...] Launar þú ok illa Þorfinni fyrir þat, er hann tók þik af skipbroti [...]."]

[Grettir svarar:] "Betra er nú fyrst at taka vásklæði af gestunum en at ámæla mér; þess mun lengi kostur."³⁹

Later, of course, his hostess learns the truth: Grettir was making merry with the Vikings only to get them relaxed and drunk, and to lead them into his trap. He saves the whole household and is richly rewarded and honoured. Yet, the happy ending of the episode, just as it is the case with Marko, will not be without its conditions and

³⁷ See chapter 72 of the saga.

³⁸ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 78.

³⁹ *Grettis saga*, p. 64.

reservations. Although impressed by Grettir's heroic deed, and although her gratitude changes her conduct towards the hero, the hostess still has some apprehension concerning Grettir: "Feel free to take anything you want in this house *that is fitting for us to give and an honour for you to accept*" ("skal þér allt sjálfboðit innan bæjar, þat sem hæfir at veita, en þér sæmð í at þiggja").⁴⁰ Perhaps the role of a scoundrel and a rogue that Grettir had performed for the Vikings fitted rather too well.

Henry and Nora Chadwick saw Marko as 'more of an ogre than a hero',⁴¹ a brute with no appeal to modern audiences. If we choose to observe Grettir from the same perspective, the description would fit too. Indeed, hardly any heroes seem capable of the acts of cruelty that Marko and Grettir commit. As a child, Grettir strangles goslings put into his charge and flays an innocent mare alive, just to spite his father, while Marko kills an Arabian girl who helped him out of her father's prison because he is disgusted with the contrast of her black skin and white teeth, and he famously cuts off the arm of a swordsmith who made him a second-best sabre. However, these outbursts of seemingly uncontrolled violence deserve some more pondering and careful observation.

In *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, Jan de Vries compares Siegfried's testing of the sword on an anvil and the similar scene with Marko in *Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman*. While the dwarf who makes the sword for Siegfried proves treacherous, and it is only the third time that the sword turns out to be good enough to cut through the anvil, for Marko, de Vries maintains the situation is very different: 'The sword is made excellently by the smith, but his reward is a hacked-off arm, because Marko cannot bear the fact that there is another hero who has an equally

⁴⁰ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 81; *Grettis saga*, p. 69.

⁴¹ Chadwick, Henry and Nora. *The Growth of Literature*. Vol. II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936, p. 311.

strong or even a better sword'.⁴² The situation is certainly not as simple as that. First of all, Marko is approaching a Christian smith from whom he should normally be able to expect complete loyalty: the enemy he plans to attack is an outlaw whom no one in the Sultan's army is able to restrain. He is paying him generously and asks for the best sabre the smith ever made. Marko comes for the sabre in good faith, well disposed. He affectionately addresses the smith by the diminutive form of his name – 'Novo.'⁴³ "Have you, Novo, made the sabre for me?" ("Јеси л', Ново, сабљу саковао?").⁴⁴ After the tested sabre cuts through the anvil, Marko asks the smith whether he had ever made a better sword. What he hears from the smith is not a 'confession' as De Vries calls it, but rather an insult:

"Yes, I have made one better sword than this,
a better sword – for a better swordsman.
When Musa left to go down to the coast
I made a sword for him, a special sword,
And when he struck my anvil with that sword
He shivered it completely, into dust."⁴⁵

["Јесам једну бољу саковао,
Бољу сабљу, а бољем јунаку:
Кад с' одврже Муса у приморје,
Што сам њему сабљу саковао,
Кад удари с њоме по наковњу,
Ни трупина здрава не остаде."] ⁴⁶

Even then Marko does not immediately rush to punish the unfaithful smith who has made a better sword not for just any hero, but precisely the one Marko is about to fight and the very reason he had asked for the sword to be made in the first place. He first tests the smith's greed, asking him to hold out his hand for the payment. It is only then that Marko cuts off his arm. It is not simply Marko's pride that is wounded,

⁴² De Vries, Jan. *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963. p. 132.

⁴³ The usage of the diminutive form might have suited the singer pressed by the decasyllabic verse, but the verse could be made with the smith's full name too and stay decasyllabic. For example: 'Јес', Novače, sablju sakovao?'

⁴⁴ *Марко Краљевић и Муса Кесеџија* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 290.

⁴⁵ *Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman* in: Locke, *Ballads*, p. 235.

⁴⁶ *Марко Краљевић и Муса Кесеџија* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 291.

but more importantly, his sense of loyalty and solidarity. The scene finishes with Marko giving Novak money to see him through for the rest of his life. Not that it absolves Marko from the act (especially as Novak will be at the end proven right – Musa is a better hero, by Marko's own admission), but it certainly sheds some light on his character: Marko accepts the responsibility for the deed and tries to compensate the smith in the way he feels he can.

To turn to Grettir's tempestuous nature, right from the beginning we are warned that Grettir was of a 'fairly short temper' ('lítill skapdeildarmaður'),⁴⁷ but the cruelty he shows against weaker creatures – the animals on his father's farm – is not entirely unprovoked; or rather, it cannot be interpreted as capricious or sadistic indulgence. This cruelty seems to be only a manifestation of the war going on between two figures in the household who much resemble one another: Grettir and his father, Ásmundr. We are immediately told that Grettir was disliked by his father, his promising, even-tempered and farming-orientated brother, Atli, being the favourite. By giving his proud son the tasks he knows must be humiliating for him, Ásmundr deliberately sets out to break Grettir's spirit. After the tending of geese – 'a trifling job for weaklings' ('lítit verk ok löðrmannligt'),⁴⁸ as Grettir calls it – proves a disaster, Ásmundr reacts by giving Grettir even more trifling a job: he asks him to rub his back by the fire. Not only does the task resemble something more suitable for the womenfolk, and actually takes place in the space in which women usually work at wool, but in a gradation of insults, Ásmundr calls his son lazy, a coward and spiritless. This does not excuse Grettir's deeds, but it puts them into framework of the age-old struggle between generations. In saga literature, it is not only the disobedient children who are criticised, but also parents who disregard the nature of

⁴⁷ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 64; *Grettis saga*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

their children and force their will on them (e.g. Höskuldr's arrangement of Hallgerðr's first marriage in the *Njáls saga*). In this sense, the words of Grettir's mother, Ásdís, directed at her husband act as the key to these introductory scenes: "I don't know which I object to more: that you keep giving him jobs, or that he does them all the same way" ("Eigi veit ek, hvárt mér þykkir meir frá móti, at þú skipar honum jafnan starfa, eða hitt, at hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi").⁴⁹

There is also another important angle through which to observe Marko and Grettir's violent tempers. As two characters that are not constructed, created from scratch, but have evolved over a long period of time, both Marko and Grettir are invested with characteristics of their mythic predecessors, the rash and capricious ancient gods. Veselin Čajkanović notes that Marko inherits characteristics of the old Slavonic supreme deity and that his clothing made of wolf skin invokes the old totemic identification of Serbian people with the wolf whose cult has, in sublimated form, survived Christianisation and was integrated in new customs.⁵⁰ Metonymically, Marko takes on some of the resilience, loneliness but also the ferocity of the wolf. Čajkanović further asserts that Marko's imprisonments in the Arabian world hark back to descents of ancient heroes and gods into the underworld, especially as it is the Arabs that have in Serbian folklore replaced the Old Slavonic chthonic deities.⁵¹ Viewed from this perspective the killing of the Arabian girl is not simply motivated by racial repugnance: Marko effectively dispatches a monster. The singer, however, does not know this, the song preserves some of the layers that are far beyond his reach, and he therefore promptly offers the hero a chance to redeem himself: first by

⁴⁹ *Grettir's saga*, p. 67; *Grettis saga*, p. 41–42.

⁵⁰ Čajkanović, Veselin. *Стара српска религија и митологија*. Београд: СКЗ, БИГЗ, Просвета, Партеон, 1994, Vol. V, p. 68.

⁵¹ Čajkanović, Veselin. *Студије из српске религије и фолклора*. Београд: СКЗ, БИГЗ, Просвета, Партеон, 1994, Vol. II, p. 115.

abhorring his own deed, and then by building monasteries to expiate for the crime he has committed.

Another layer that adds darker shades to Marko's character is created as in his role of the fighter against oppression and social injustice he treads upon the territory of the celebrated, but also highly morally ambiguous Serbian and Croatian outlaws: *hajduks* and *uskoks*. The respect that tradition has for outlaws comes not only because they were the only resistance to the occupying force, or because of their spectacular courage in battle and ability to endure torture in captivity, but also their moral agenda and the following of a strict code of conduct which included the protection of the village communities that support them and taking care of the families of the outlaws that had fallen in battle. At the same time, they robbed and killed to obtain wealth, and although their victims were mostly the Turks, they sometimes included merchants, travellers or locals.⁵² For all the respect people (epic singers among them) had for outlaws, they never nurtured illusions about them. Praised for their bravery and astound endurance, an outlaw's occupation is still regarded as 'a bad trade'⁵³ in which moral and criminal impulses easily become entangled.

Similarly, in his appearance (red hair, enormous physique), in his explosive disposition and in his role as a dispatcher of monsters and giants, Grettir resembles

⁵² In *Srpski rječnik* (Serbian Dictionary) Vuk Karadžić captures the ambiguity and intricacy of the attitudes towards outlaws: 'Our people think and sing in their songs that men became outlaws ('hajduci') in Serbia as a result of Turkish terror and misrule. It should be said that some went off to be outlaws without being forced to do it, in order to wear what clothes and carry what weapons they liked or to take revenge on someone; but the full truth is that the milder the Turkish government, the fewer outlaws there were in the land, and the worse and more arbitrary it was, the more outlaws were there.' (Karadžić in: Koljević, Svetozar. *The Epic in the Making*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 216.)

⁵³ This is how chief Bogosav characterises the profession of his blood brother, the famous *hajduk* Starina Novak ('Old Novak'), as he asks him for the reasons he chose it: "What trouble had forced you/ To break your neck walking in the mountains/ in outlawry, the bad trade?" ("Каква тебе оћера невоља/ врат ломити, по гори ходити,/ по хајдуци, по лошу занату? ") See *Старина Новак и кнез Богосав* in: Караџић, Vol. III, p. 9.

the Old Norse deity of thunder, Þórr.⁵⁴ In addition, through his role as a poet Grettir is also partaking of some of the characteristics linked to the Norse chief god and the poet of poets – Óðinn. Óðinn (the name is derived from an adjective for ‘furious’, ‘wild’, ‘mad’)⁵⁵ famously steals the mead of poetry, pledges one eye in return for wisdom and also hangs himself as a sacrifice to be able to learn the runes of wisdom.⁵⁶ Thus he ultimately becomes the patron of poets in the Scandinavian world who inherit some of his characteristics. Considering another famous poet of saga literature, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Margaret Clunies Ross points out that the ‘extreme instability of temper [...] accompanies the gift of poetry’.⁵⁷ In her opinion, the connection to Óðinn and the old Scandinavian belief that connects the poet’s talent with extraordinary mental states (shape-shifting, berserk⁵⁸ frenzy...) is further strengthened by medieval theories of humours. Melancholy is the humour characteristic of poets, marked by ‘a lack of moderation in [...] behaviour, [...] abrupt transitions from hostility, pettiness and avarice to sociability and generosity’.⁵⁹ Observed from this perspective, the responsibility for tempestuous outbursts is somewhat shifted from the hero, as they are understood to be beyond the power of his will. The craft of poetry and the glimpses it affords into the most intimate thoughts of its complex creators are the redeeming qualities of the hero-poets, and the melancholy humour in which they originate is thus rendered a necessary evil. It is through the complex journey in which the features absorbed from earlier mythic and

⁵⁴ On Þórr’s characteristics and godly attributes, see Branston, Brian. *Gods of the North*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1980, pp. 120-123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ See *Ibid.*, pp. 113-116.

⁵⁷ Clunies Ross, Margaret. ‘The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in *Egils saga*’ in: Tucker, John, ed. *Sagas of the Icelanders: a Book of Essays*, New York: Garland Pub, 1989, p. 131.

⁵⁸ According to Fox and Pálsson ‘berserks (‘bear-shirts’) were warriors valued for their capacity to run amuck and fight with murderous frenzy, impervious to pain. They figure in the sagas as stock villains, and may indeed have existed more in literature than in history’. (Fox, Denton and Herman Pálsson, transl. *Grettir’s Saga*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, p. 4.)

⁵⁹ Clunies Ross, ‘The Art of Poetry’, p. 136.

heroic figures intertwine (more or less harmoniously) with newer layers of representation that the characters of both Marko and Grettir gain multiple shades, nuances.

There also seems to be a causal connection between our two heroes' virtues and vices. The violent temper connected with saga poets results in the medium that actually unmasks their outer arrogance. Hence, Grettir's poetry reveals a lonely person who longs to be accepted by society, a person tormented by his deeds (Glámr's eyes haunt him and make him afraid of dark) and capable of experiencing shame (the encounter with Loptr/Hallmundr). For all the differences he has had with his father and brother, for all the effort he invests into appearing unmoved by their deaths, Grettir is deeply distressed:

“In one fell swoop it befell
the wise verse-gatherer: outlawry,
my father's death to bear nobly
in silence, and my brother's .”⁶⁰

[“Allt kom senn at svinnum,
sekð mín, bragar tíni,
föður skal drengur af dauða
drjúghljóður ok svá bróður;”]⁶¹

It is also through Grettir's poetry, his lampooning (the encounter with the boastful coward, Gísli)⁶² and panegyric verses (e.g. verses dedicated to Þorfinnr, his half-brother – Þorsteinn the Galleon, and Bersi),⁶³ that we access his jovial nature and a brighter, sociable side. Yet Grettir does not merely delight in his own wit and sense of humour, he appreciates these qualities in others too. He will patiently suffer the impudent and slovenly behaviour of his servant, Þorbjörn *glaumr* ('Noisy'), only because of the rogue's gift of telling amusing stories and jokes. He is also charmed

⁶⁰ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 120.

⁶¹ *Grettis saga*, p. 147.

⁶² See *Grettir's Saga*, p. 143; *Grettis saga*, pp. 86-87.

⁶³ See *Grettir's Saga*, p. 90; *Grettis saga*, p. 193.

by the cheerful farmer, Sveinn. What starts as a hot pursuit when Grettir ‘borrows’ Sveinn’s horse, Saddle-head, without asking the farmer for permission, soon turns into a humorous poetry contest between the pursuer and the pursued. On the run, Grettir would compose verses and ask various people he meets on his way to repeat them to Sveinn, who would, on the other hand, compose verses as a response to Grettir’s stanzas. Finally, at Grímr’s farm, Sveinn catches up with Grettir and, instead of a greeting, he inundates all present with a flood of question-verses:

“Who has been riding my mare?
What will I earn for the favour?
Who has seen a greater thief?
What has the cowl-wearer staked?”⁶⁴

[“Hverr reið hryssu várri;
hver verðr raun á launum;
hverr sá hvinn et stœrra;
hvat mun kuflbúinn dufla.”]⁶⁵

Grettir is not offended by the verses but offers his friendship as an atonement, recognising Sveinn’s right to look after his property. The episode ends in reconciliation, mutual reciting of verses that the two poets dub the ‘Saddle-head Verses’ and a lot of merry-making.

Although Marko does not share a cultural and literary background with Grettir, nor is he by any means presented as a poet, there still seems to be a connection between his virtues and vices. Koljević perceives his capability for selfless dedication to rectifying wrongs as a trait that springs up from the same source as his peppery nature:

If he [Marko] were not so hot-tempered, he could hardly be such a fighter for better social and human justice; he could hardly be so easily moved to action by other people’s suffering. [...] And after all, in a great hero everything has to be on a heroic scale.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Grettir’s Saga*, p. 122.

⁶⁵ *Grettis saga*, pp. 151-152.

⁶⁶ Koljević, *Epic*, p. 180.

It is from Marko's passionate nature that his great capability for sympathy and compassion originates. His supposedly 'first heroic deed' was prompted by the sight of thirty enslaved Serbian maidens who beseech him for his help. Unarmed, he humbly and courteously offers their captor, the Paša of Jedren, a ransom for the girls, but is met with a brutal response: the Paša starts striking him with his whip. It is most often brutality of the high and mighty that infuriates Marko and then he does not necessarily need a weapon to vent his rage. He kills the Paša with the saddlebag in which he keeps his horse's shoes, chases off his party and delivers the thirty captive maidens. Marko's sympathies always lie with the weak and the poor, and it is not only the Turks' injustices that he abhors, but his friends' and family's too. He refuses to attend his blood-brother's *slava* (a serious offence in Serbian patriarchal tradition) because of his upstart behaviour, his reverence for the *nouveau riche*, disrespect towards the impoverished old lords (including his old parents), and his scorn of the poor whom he drives away from the feast.⁶⁷ In *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs*, he is called upon by the young Prince Uroš, Tsar Dušan's son, to proclaim the rightful heir to the Serbian throne. The vultures who contest Prince Uroš's birth-right are Marko's very father and two uncles. Undeterred by his family ties and the combination of emotional blackmail and temptation with which his father and uncles greet him, Marko obeys his mother's advice:

"My son, Marko, my only son, Marko,
so that my milk may not bring curse on you,
do not, my son, ever speak a falsehood,
for your father's nor for your uncles' sake
but just the truth of the God Almighty."⁶⁸

["Марко сине једини у мајке!

⁶⁷ *Марко Краљевић и бег Костадин* in: Караџић, Vol. II, pp. 255-257.

⁶⁸ *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs* in: Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, transl. *Songs of the Serbian People*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997, p. 74.

Не била ти моја рана клета,
Немој, сине, говорити криво
Ни по бабу, ни по стричевима,
Већ по правди Бога истинога;”]⁶⁹

Marko proclaims the young prince Uroš to be heir to the throne and the poem finishes with a combination of curses and blessings that encapsulate the great paradox of his epic career:

King Vukašin is enraged at Marko,
and he utters bitter curses at him:
“My son, Marko, may God smite you dead now!
And may you have neither a grave nor the offspring!
May your own soul never leave your body
until you serve the Turkish tsar as a slave!”
The king hurls oaths, the tsar sends his blessings:
“Godson, Marko, may God help you always!
May your face shine at divan⁷⁰ like the sun!
May your saber cut swiftly in battle!
May there be no greater hero than you!
May your bright name be remembered always,
as long as there are sun and the moon!”
What they said then, it came to pass later.⁷¹

[На Марка је врло жао краљу,
Те га љуто куне и проклиње:
“Сине Марко, да те Бог убије!
Ти немао гроба ни порода!
И да би ти душа не испала,
Док Турскога цара не дворио!”
Краљ га куне, цар га благосиља:
“Куме Марко, Бог ти помогао!
Твоје лице св’јетло на дивану!
Твоја сабља сјекла на мејдану!
Нада те се не нашло јунака!
Име ти се свуда спомињало,
Док је сунца и док је мјесеца!”
Што су рекли тако му се стекло.]⁷²

Although Marko’s strength is such that he is able to squeeze two drops of water out of dry cornel-wood, although he is able to take on hosts of enemies single-handed

⁶⁹ *Урош и Мрљавчевићи* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 144.

⁷⁰ According to Holton and Mihailovich (p. 78), “The *divan* is the sultan’s court”, but the term can also be used “to describe not the sultan’s court in the physical sense, but a meeting for a conversation at that court, or as a verb, *divaniti*, “to converse” (p. 171).

⁷¹ *Uroš and the Mrljavčevićs* in: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 78.

⁷² *Урош и Мрљавчевићи* in: Караџић, Vol. II, . 146-147.

and punish injustice and evil at every turn, he is never perceived as omnipotent. For all his spectacularly tempestuous nature, Marko does not so readily opt for conflict as the heroes of earlier medieval epics seem to do. In the above mentioned poem, *Marko Kraljević and the Arab*, he is not easily moved into action against the Arab, and the reason is pretty prosaic, even compromising by 'normal' epic standards: Marko is not too keen on losing his head. Both the Turkish Sultan and Sultana respectively offer considerable amounts of treasure for him to save their daughter, but Marko does not find this tempting enough (financially or morally) to risk his life:

“I do not dare take on the Arab.
Arab is a knight of high prowess;
when he takes my head from my shoulders,
what do I need the three-loads of treasure for?”

[“Ја не смијем на Арапа доћи;
Арапин је јунак на мејдану;
Кад ми узме са рамена главу,
Што ће мене три товара блага?”]⁷³

He only accepts the challenge after the girl herself beseeches him for help, calling him her brother before his God⁷⁴ and the patron saint of sworn brotherhood/sisterhood, St. John. But even then Marko is not all of a sudden overcome by the fighting urge and heroic enthusiasm. Rather, he feels pressed into the affair by his faith and the patriarchal obligations with which his new sworn sister encumbers him:

“Alas me, my sister!
It's bad to go, even worse to stay:
If I'm not afraid of the Tsar and Tsaritsa,
I am afraid of God and St. John;
Well, I'll go, even if not to return.”

[“Јаох мене, моја посестримо!
Зло је поћи, а горе не поћи:
Да с' не бојим цара и царице,
Ја се бојим Бога и Јована;

⁷³ *Марко Краљевић и Арапин in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 280.*

⁷⁴ The singer does not forget that the girl is of Muslim faith.

Баш ћу поћи, да не ћу ни доћи.”⁷⁵

In combat, Marko does not always overpower his opponents with the sheer superiority of his martial skills, but rather uses his wits and, occasionally, simple dirty tricks. In *Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman*, Marko and Musa (as a compulsory part of combat-related formulas) waste all their weapons and wrestle about the field. Musa chivalrously gives Marko the chance to strike first and after Marko's attempt fails, and he finds himself off his feet with Musa about to deal him a death-blow, he does not think twice about calling his blood-sister, a *vila*,⁷⁶ to the rescue. In a humorous twist, she first takes her time to chide her foster-brother for this rather unheroic conduct in which two people are fighting against one, but through her chiding slyly slips a helpful metaphor, reminding him of his 'hidden snakes' ('ryje из порaje'),⁷⁷ i.e. his hidden daggers, that he might want to use. Her advice comes very handy, as well as her voice coming out of nowhere which forces the perplexed Musa's gaze from Marko skywards: quite different from what would be expected from Beowulf, Roland or Miloš Obilić, for that matter.

Marko's epic position is much more intricate than that of these heroes and the complexity of his world disallows simple moral choices. The country is already lost to the Turks and not even a hero of Marko's calibre is expected to change that. He is there to offer the subjugated people a suitable role-model. At best, he can take some liberties such as drinking wine at Ramadan, stepping on the Sultan's prayer rug in his boots and making him tremble by driving him to the wall. Flamboyant as his

⁷⁵ *Марко Краљевић и Арапин in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 281-282.*

⁷⁶ According to Geoffrey Locke, vilas are 'nature spirits, usually in the form of beautiful young women, born of dew and herbs and living in the mountains, trees and clouds. They often appear as "familiars" to the epic heroes - Marko's personal Vila is here addressed as "blood-sister" (*posestrima*)'. (Locke, *Ballads*, pp. 427-428.)

⁷⁷ *Марко Краљевић и Муса Кесеџија in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 293.*

victories are, they are small-scale, often comical. Being a vassal, his epic arena differs drastically from that of the Kosovo martyrs. As Koljević notes:

[...] Marko treads a world in which the ordeal is over; the question is not how one could most honourably die, but how one could survive with as little dishonour and shame as possible in the circumstances.⁷⁸

As a result, Marko comes across as a more life-like, complex character, whose extraordinary abilities still manage to fit the framework of the neither tragic nor idyllic everyday.

Grettir too is of a rather pragmatic mind and shares with Marko what Robert Cockcroft calls 'comic survivalism'.⁷⁹ He might be strong enough to move a several-ton boulder, wrestle a bear and take on supernatural creatures, but he is by no means unconcerned about his enemies' numbers or their aptitude:

Grettir himself has said that he felt confident about fighting any three men at once, nor would he flee from four without putting it to the test, but would only fight more men than that if his life was at stake [...].⁸⁰

[Svá hefir Grettir sagt, at hann þóttisk þruggur til vígs við flesta menn, þó at þrír væri saman, en hann myndi eigi flýja fjórum at óreyndu, en því at eins berjask við fleiri, nema hann ætti hendr sínar at verja [...]]⁸¹

On occasion, even one man can prove too many for Grettir. Pressed by the hardships of outlawry, denied food and shelter and exploited by opportunist hosts, Grettir stoops to robbery and stealing, if for a short while. In the scene in which he tries to 'relieve' Loptr of some of his belongings, Grettir behaves just as his father had predicted at the time of his childhood - as a pestering brawler. After Loptr refuses to

⁷⁸ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 191.

⁷⁹ Cockcroft, Robert. 'The concept of centrality and marginality, and their application to the study of heroic narrative' in: Branch, Michael and Celia Hawkesworth, eds. *The Uses of Tradition: a Comparative Enquiry into the Nature, Uses and Functions of Oral Poetry in the Balkans, the Baltic, and Africa*, London: Quorn Selective Repro Ltd., 1994, p. 118.

⁸⁰ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 99.

⁸¹ *Grettis saga*, p. 107.

give up his property, despite Grettir's repeated bullying, and tries to ride away peacefully, Grettir impertinently grabs at the reins of Loptr's horse. Even then Loptr does not act rashly, but rather, attempts to reason with his opponent, and when this fails, he simply pulls the reins out of Grettir's grip and rides away. Realising how strong Loptr is, Grettir does not make another attempt to pick up a fight. Rather, he is left dumbstruck, peering at his burning palms and imagining (in his poetry) his mother asking him if he was frightened of Loptr.⁸²

In many ways Grettir and Marko fall short of the kind of nobility and heroic determinism we encounter in the earlier medieval epic models such as Beowulf or Roland. At the same time, they are graced with some unparalleled characteristics: they are aware of their limitations and they do not take themselves too seriously; their integrity is not threatened by an occasional joke at their expense and for all their hasty temper, they are capable of exquisite gentility and are able to appreciate virtues in others, friends and foes alike. From the virtues he appreciates, and the vices that he deplores in other people, a picture may be constructed of Grettir's ethics and even his attitude towards himself. It is interesting that he does not have patience, nor any kind of appreciation for the people who resemble him in temper. When his peace-loving brother, Atli, warns him about an arrogant crowd they are about to meet at a horse-fight, Grettir's opinion is that that sort of people deserve to "pay the price for their impetuosity if they can't control themselves" ("Gjaldi þeir sjálfir ofstopa sins [...] ef þeir hafa eigi í hófi").⁸³ Although outlawed, he refuses to reconcile himself to the position. He detests and mistrusts outlaws, as he will put it to a scoundrel bribed to kill him: "You outlaws are difficult to see through [...]" ("eru þér ok

⁸² *Grettir's Saga*, p. 135; *Grettis saga*, p. 177.

⁸³ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 96; *Grettis saga*, p. 99.

vansénir skógarmenninir [...])”⁸⁴ With ‘you outlaws’, the hero clearly disassociates himself from the label. Perhaps Grettir cannot see himself in these terms because he has been outlawed for a crime he did not commit – he had only borrowed some fire from the Icelanders he met in Norway and was not responsible for their burning. It was an accident and Grettir’s outlawry is seen in terms of bad fortune. On the other hand, ‘fortune’ is in saga literature a concept only partly connected to fate and is considered an inextricable part of one’s character: only moderation and temperance are rewarded with good fortune. As Þórarinn (not incidentally nick-named *inn spaki*, ‘the Wise’) says of Grettir: “[...] he is a man of unbridled temper, and I doubt how much good fortune he will enjoy” (“[...] mikill ofsi er honum nú í skapi, ok grunar mik um, hversu heilladrjúgr han veðr”).⁸⁵ Be that as it may, Grettir’s violence is not completely uncontrolled. He is able to see a clear distinction between the impotent boasting of the harmless Gísli and the malevolent scheming of the arrogant berserk Björn and punishes each accordingly. As can be seen from the words of the chieftain revered throughout saga literature, Snorri, directed at his unworthy son, there are different kinds of arrogance:

“Many a man is blind to his own faults, and this shows the great difference between the two of you [i.e. his son, Þóroddr, and Grettir]. You struck blows at him and he could have done anything he wanted with you. But Grettir acted wisely by not killing you, because I would not have put up with your remaining unavenged. For my part, I shall help him if I am present when his affairs are discussed.”⁸⁶

[“Margr er dulinn at sér, ok varð ykkarr mikill mannamunr; þú hjótt upp á hann, en hann mátti gera við þik, hvat er hann vildi. En þó gerði Grettir vitrliga, er hann drap þik eigi, því at ek mynda eigi nennt hafa, at þín væri óhefnt; skal ek heldr leggja honum til liðs, ef verð við staddr hans mál.”]⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 136; *Grettis saga*, p. 179.

⁸⁵ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 98; *Grettis saga*, pp. 104-105.

⁸⁶ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 157.

⁸⁷ *Grettis saga*, p. 222.

The reader does not sympathise with the people Grettir kills or with the people trying to bring Grettir to ‘justice’ such as his killer, Þorbjörn öngull. Consequently, the characters whom Grettir admires, whose company he seeks and in whom he invests a lot of tender emotions, are all moderate and even-tempered people such as his faithful friend from Norway, Arnbjörn,⁸⁸ or his young brother and a treasured companion in the worst of times, Illugi. His pride does not forbid respect for the people who deserve it, such as the wise chieftains, Guðmundr the Powerful and Snorri, whose advice he cherishes and readily accepts. The friendships that Grettir forms and the malice and arrogance that he loathes are telling of the fact that at least his heart is in the right place, if not all of his actions. Could they also be telling of which side of his own character Grettir prefers? The saga avoids a final answer.

Although the complexity of Grettir’s character owes much to the already discussed dynamics of distributed authorship by which it came into being, there also are signs of the saga writers starting to exploit the longevity of the form and allowing Grettir to grow and develop as a character. Once a cruel torturer of animals, Grettir lives to be moved by the desolate bleating of the ewe whose lamb he has slaughtered in order to satisfy his hunger, while the ram he encounters on the island which is to be his final refuge, becomes a friend. A person who had once boasted to a parent-obeying peer: “I don’t leave other people to decide where I go [...]” (“á ek ekki [...] ferðir mínar undir öðrum mönnum [...]”),⁸⁹ asks for his mother’s consent before taking his brother, Illugi, with him for company and comfort. Unrelenting avenger of every trifle, a conceited hot-head whose pride could not suffer the laughter of his friends when he failed to reach a ball thrown too high, he learns how to laugh at

⁸⁸ Not to be confused with Egill’s Norwegian friend Arinbjörn! See chapter 3, p. 179.

⁸⁹ *Grettir’s Saga*, p. 95; *Grettis saga*, p. 98.

himself. Instead of punishing the impertinent remarks of a raunchy maidservant concerning his loins, Grettir merrily replies:

“The seamstress sitting at home,
short-sworded she calls me;
maybe the boastful hand-maiden
of ball-trunks is telling the truth. *ball-trunks: penises*
but a young man like me
can expect sprouts to grow
in the groin-forest: Get ready
for action, splay-legged goddess.”⁹⁰

[“Sverðlítinn kvað sæta,
saumskorða, mik orðinn;
Hrist hefir hreðja kvista
hölin satt at mæla;
allengi má ungum,
eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
lágr í læra skógi,
lotu, faxi mér vaxa.”]⁹¹

Proud and fierce, just like Grettir, Marko too does not take himself nor the world he lives in too seriously. In *Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kostur* he disguises himself as a monk and happily ‘weds’ his kidnapped wife to her captor, Mina. Suspicious Mina recognises Šarac (Marko’s famous horse) and asks ‘the monk’ how he came by it. He answers that he got it as a bequest for burying the horse’s hot-headed master, ‘one big fool/ by name of Kraljević Marko’ (‘једна будалина/ по имену Краљевићу Марко’),⁹² who has fallen while fighting for the Sultan against the Arabs. When, during the ‘wedding feast’, the happy ‘groom’ grants Marko’s request to dance his ‘light monkish dance’ (‘ситно калуђерски’),⁹³ the whole castle starts shaking. Marko then kills Mina and saves his wife. But not every joke has to

⁹⁰ *Grettir’s Saga*, p. 166. It is possible to conjecture that the ‘action’ Grettir refers to here is rape, since the young woman initially objects to Grettir’s advances that immediately follow his verses. This, however, seems unlikely as we are told that she enjoyed the experience and was convinced of Grettir’s prowess in all departments. In addition, the farmer’s daughter who accompanied her at the time has no difficulty leaving Grettir’s room, and does not seem to think the maidservant wishes to be rescued, as she sends no one to help her. Finally, whatever one’s position on what ‘actually’ occurred between Grettir and the maidservant, the tone of narration is itself unmistakably humorous.

⁹¹ *Grettis saga*, pp. 240-241.

⁹² *Марко Краљевић и Мина од Костура in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 267.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

end in bloodshed. When a young Turk, Alil Aga, gullibly falls victim to Marko's hustling, he does not get killed at the end of the poem. Hungry for instant glory, Alil Aga tries to seize the opportunity to fight Marko who feigns a not-so-glorious illness – dysentery. Marko has also seemingly lost his nerve: every time Alil Aga tries to provoke him into a contest with arrows by tugging at his *dolaman*,⁹⁴ Marko cuts off that piece of the *dolaman* with the words: "Leave us, you plague, may the devil take you!"⁹⁵ ("Иди бедо, аратос те било!").⁹⁶ At the end Marko wins the wager despite the fact that Alil Aga does not only take advantage of Marko's 'illness' but, to make sure he wins, he also bribes the judge. According to the Turk's own terms as regards the loser, Marko should kill Alil Aga, take his wife and his wealth. Instead, Marko accepts his enemy's offer of blood-brotherhood. As for the wife and the treasure:

"O you Turk, may the living God smite you,
 Call me brother but why give me your wife?
 I have no need for your lovely lady,
 for among us it's not like among Turks.
 A brother's wife is to us a sister.
 In my own house I have a faithful wife,
 a lady wife, her name is Jelica.
 I'd forgive you everything, my brother,
 except that you have destroyed my *dolaman*.
 For that reason, give me three loads of gold,
 so that I may have my torn *dolaman* mended."⁹⁷

["О Турчине, жив' те Бог убио!
 Буд ме братиш, што ми жену дајеш?
 Мене твоја жена не требаје,
 У нас није, кано у Турака,
 Снашица је, кано и сестрица;
 Ја на дому имам љубу верну,
 Племениту Јелицу госпођу;
 А све би ти, брате, опростио
 Али си ми издрьо доламу,
 Већ дај мене три товара блага,
 Да искрпим на долами скуте."]⁹⁸

⁹⁴ A long embroidered belt, valued by the noblemen of the time.

⁹⁵ *Marko Kraljević and Alil Aga in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 178.

⁹⁶ *Марко Краљевић и Алил ага in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 258.

⁹⁷ *Marko Kraljević and Alil Aga in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 181.

⁹⁸ *Марко Краљевић и Алил ага in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 260.

Like Grettir, Marko respects virtue in another, even if at his own expense. When he fraudulently kills Musa, he feels some remorse and commends his opponent: “Dear God!” he cried, “Have mercy on my soul!/ For I have slain a better man than me!”⁹⁹ (“Јаох мене до Бога милога!/ Ђе погубих од себе бољега”).¹⁰⁰ On another occasion, he commends the shrewdness of perception and the sense for diplomacy in a young maiden who wounds his pride by choosing another for her bridegroom, but still manages to give Marko the necessary respect by honouring him with the title of the best man at her wedding and passing his test for greed¹⁰¹ (*A Maiden Outwits Marko*¹⁰²).

Marko and Grettir differ from most epic heroes in the degree of development and in their multidimensional nature, the quality that does not require from the audience to be ‘at a certain stage of civilization’¹⁰³ in order to be able to appreciate it. It is not simply ‘vital energies of the troublemaker’¹⁰⁴ that attract the audience to Marko and Grettir, but rather their full-blooded presence, their gusto and their moodiness, their gentility and their ferociousness, their moral excellence and moral ambiguity, their nobility and human misery, humour and affliction. Marko and Grettir are heroes who live in more sceptical worlds than their earlier medieval European heroic counterparts, Beowulf, Siegfried and Roland, worlds disillusioned by vassalage, disillusioned by the destructive outcome of the ‘heroic’ endeavours of powerful and proud individuals. They needed to speak to the peoples let down by heroes who made them pawns in their own petty power-struggles (those of the

⁹⁹ *Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman in: Locke, Ballads*, p. 243.

¹⁰⁰ *Марко Краљевић и Муса Кесеџија in: Караџић, Vol. II*, p. 293.

¹⁰¹ As opposed to Novak the Swordsmith who, as we have seen earlier, fails it.

¹⁰² *Дјевојка надмудрила Марка in: Караџић, Vol. II*, pp. 177-179.

¹⁰³ De Vries, *Heroic Song*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ Clunies Ross, ‘The Art of Poetry’, p. 126. Clunies Ross refers here to Lönnroth’s ‘less noble heathen’ such as Egill, but it applies to Grettir too as he belongs to the same category of a troublesome hero-poet.

Sturlung age, or those in the wake of Tsar Dušan the Mighty's Empire). At the same time, Marko and Grettir inhabit worlds in which the heroes, though not expected to be omnipotent saviours of nations, were still needed to guide and inspire. These heroes were not to emerge out of enchanted castles – closed, mysterious places that could house any kind of fantasy. They had to emerge out of the people itself. Both literatures were thus nurturing this new breed of heroes: erring human beings whose pride is costly and whose noble virtues sometimes turn into vices, combatants who sometimes have to compromise with and even run before their enemies, heroes who value their lives a trifle more than their honour, philosophers who, arrogant as they can be, still do not suffer from an incurable dose of self-importance and are able to laugh at themselves. A hero is revered, but not as an untouchable figure: he can be criticised, he can even be laughed at and at the same time loved for his flaws as much as for his prodigious qualities. We cannot possibly (and we are not invited to) accept Marko and Grettir as parable-like models of virtue, but we can and we do sympathise with them; we accept them as engaging and challenging literary figures.

4. 3 Supporting Roles: Growing in Stature

Whether prose narratives or narrative poems, epics are primarily centred around a male heroic figure, hence, of course, we also call them 'heroic literature'. All other characters that feature in these narratives are not given as much prominence and are defined through their relationship to the hero. In other words, they 'support' the action built around the central character and through this function of theirs could be termed as 'supporting roles'. The intricacy and imperfection of heroes of Serbian epic poetry and the sagas of Icelanders have, however, created a space for the

supporting characters to gain in prominence and generate an interest not entirely dependent on their relationship with a hero.

a) Villains or adversaries?

Just as the complexity with which some of the central characters of the sagas and epic poems are presented makes us think of them more in terms of ‘protagonists’ than ‘heroes’ (our sympathies remain with them but they are not presented as paragons of moral virtue, not even martial infallibility), the complexity we encounter in the characters that the central figures find themselves at odds with, means that they do not so readily fit the label of ‘villain’. Of course, there are hosts of expendable creatures that would fit the category if they moved beyond caricature, if their presence was felt and if their dexterity at least came close to endangering a hero’s life. Such are the pestering berserk characters regularly dispatched by Hrútr, Gunnarr, or many a young Icelandic hero seeking fortune in foreign lands and keen on proving his worth before royalty; and, indeed, such are the masses of nameless Turks and Arabs that flee or suffer death at Marko’s powerful hands. In turn, the more prominence an adversary character is given, the more of a puzzle this character tends to be. For, as Einar Ól. Sveinsson points out: ‘If the author’s sympathy for his [villain] characters is sometimes not very strong, his curiosity and desire to see and understand are so much the stronger’.¹⁰⁵ Among the villain characters in the sagas of Icelanders the figure of Mörðr Valgarðsson emerges as one of the most challenging.

As opposed to brainless berserks, Mörðr is the driving force of calculated evil in *Njáls saga* in which, we are immediately informed, he plays a major part. His careful scheming effectively brings about deaths of two heroes of the saga, the

¹⁰⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971, p. 100.

temperate but stalwart Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, and the wise and honourable lawman Njáll, yet chillingly, his ability to bend and conform under pressure secures him survival at the end of the saga. In many ways Mörðr is the mirror image of Njáll: he is no warrior but rather an exceptionally skilled lawman and a shrewd man whose advice is sought after, and whom people often seem to trust. But, as with a mirror image, everything about him is inverted: where Njáll is benevolent, he is malicious; where Njáll helps with a mind to benefit another, Mörðr ‘helps’ only if there is something to be gained by it; where Njáll is wise, Mörðr is cunning; where Njáll is truthful, Mörðr is a hypocrite.

As he arrives on the scene, Mörðr is introduced as ‘devious in nature and malicious in his counsels’ (‘hann var slægr maðr í skapferðum ok illgjarn í ráðum’),¹⁰⁶ and this description is emphasised when he is again referred to as ‘devious and malicious’ (‘slægr ok illgjarn’)¹⁰⁷ on another occasion. Although his menacing presence in the saga is overwhelming, it does not resemble that of Grendel (*Beowulf*) or Grendel’s mother; it is not fiendish and thus alienating, but human and motivated. The saga offers some psychological backing for this character’s vicious deeds – envy that he harbours against Gunnarr. Rather than being odd, this envy is intensified by the irony of the fact that Mörðr and Gunnarr are related, and even more by the fact that Mörðr is indebted to Gunnarr for having recovered his mother’s (Unnr) dowry. As Einar Ól. Sveinsson explains, ‘good deeds can lead to ingratitude, as well as to gratitude, to hatred as well as to love’.¹⁰⁸ Although a wealthy descendant of chieftains (both on his mother’s and his father’s side), Mörðr does not enjoy the same power and respect in the community as his kinsman Gunnarr, and this is what

¹⁰⁶ *Njal’s Saga in*: Viðar Hreinsson. ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Robert Cook, transl. Iceland: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997. Vol. III, p. 30; *Brennu-Njáls saga*. ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit 1954, Vol. XII, p. 70.

¹⁰⁷ *Njal’s Saga*, p. 55; *Njáls saga*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga*, p. 105.

fuels his jealousy and hatred. With Njáll he has another kind of conflict, less explosive perhaps, but deeper, almost primeval. Even when plotting against Gunnarr, Mörðr is aware that he is actually fighting Gunnarr's close friend Njáll: devising plans is Mörðr's and Njáll's area of expertise, not Gunnarr's, and the court is their virtual battlefield. When he openly challenges Njáll at the Althing concerning some legal advice he has given to Gunnarr, he loses the case and feels publicly humiliated. Ultimately however, Mörðr does win this battle over Gunnarr, managing to bring about his death by, ironically, making Njáll's prophecies that were meant to save his friend, work against Gunnarr. He recognises that if the breach against the first of Njáll's warnings (Gunnarr must not kill two men from the same family) is carried out, the second (Gunnarr must not break an agreement) will inevitably follow. Thus, he manipulates the man whose father has been slain by Gunnarr into action and, as the man proves no match for Gunnarr, the rest of the plan runs smoothly: Gunnarr is outlawed, sets off for exile, changes his mind at the last moment (ultimately breaking the settlement) and this leads to an attack on his home in which he dies. The revenge on both friends (Gunnarr is killed, and Njáll is doubly defeated: he has lost a friend and his prophecies failed as warnings; they came true) satisfies Mörðr for a while, but then Njáll creates the Fifth Court and establishes his foster-son, Höskuldr, as a chieftain. The new chieftain attracts the support from Mörðr's thingmen¹⁰⁹ and hence directly infringes the benefits Mörðr has derived from the situation. As a revenge, and acting on the dying wish of his father, Mörðr sets the sons of Njáll at odds with Höskuldr by spreading slander. Njálssons kill their foster-brother, and the retaliation of Höskuldr's powerful relatives leads to the burning of Njáll and his family. Mörðr,

¹⁰⁹ Men who owed allegiance to Mörðr and were compelled to support him at Assemblies. However, they were free to choose the protection of another chieftain if they found it a more prosperous allegiance.

on the other hand, manages to keep himself at just the right distance to escape the wrath of the avengers.

Yet, it is impossible to regard Mörðr purely in terms of evil that needs to be exterminated so that the good and harmony among people may prevail. There was no harmony to begin with, and no will strong enough among the ‘good men’ of the saga to escape the vicious circles of revenge and pride. Mörðr’s machinations succeed not only because of the brilliance of his ‘evil genius’ (he works within the established patterns of the system), but because the society itself is ill. The critique is rather directed at the stale persistence of the code of honour and blood vengeance that compels the people who respect each other find themselves at the opposite sides of a feud. If anything, Mörðr merely capitalises on the existing flaws in the system and in people. In many ways the powerful men who fall victims to Mörðr’s schemes contribute to their downfall themselves: Mörðr counts on Gunnarr’s weaknesses that bear the potential to break a settlement and merely ‘helps’ those to surface; and, it is the gullibility and vanity of the sons of Njáll, fed with Mörðr’s compliments and gifts, that makes them swallow his slanders about Höskuldr too.

In addition, to perceive Mörðr as a villain requires a certain principled stance, an integrity that we encounter in Hagen for example (*Nibelungenlied*), or the fiendish depravity and commitment to evil of Grendel (*Beowulf*). By contrast, Mörðr is a semi-comical figure, a petty man (by his own admission) in awe of wealth and authority, constantly pushed around by both his father and his father-in-law, as ready to beg for his life and bribe his way out of difficult situations, as to stab somebody in the back. Most surprisingly, just like everybody else in the saga, Mörðr too is easily manipulated, for he too has a weakness. When Njáll’s son-in-law, Kári Sölmundarson, turns to the chieftain Gizurr the White for help and advice concerning

the legal proceedings against the burners, Gizurr sends him to his son-in-law, Mörðr who, we know, is a skilled lawman. Predicting that Mörðr will try to weasel his way out of direct confrontation with the powerful leader of the burners, Flosi, Gizurr puts some important assets into Kári's hands:

“If he [Mörðr] utters any objection to this, go into a rage and act as if you'll sink your axe into his head. Tell him also of my anger, if he plays hard to get. Tell him also that I will come for my daughter Thorkatla and bring her home with me. He won't be able to endure that, for he loves her as he loves the eyes in his head.”¹¹⁰

[“[...] Ef hann [Mörðr] mælir nökkuru orði í móti þessu, þá skaltú gera þik sem reiðastan ok lát sem þú munir hafa øxi í höfði honum; þú skalt ok segja í annan stað reiði mína, ef hann vill láta illa at þessu komask. Þar með skaltú segja, at ek mun sækja Þorkötl, dóttur mína, ok láta hana fara heim til mín, en þat mun hann eigi þola, því at hann ann henni sem augum í höfði sér.”]¹¹¹

During the meeting, Kári does not even come close to drawing the axe, or threatening of the sort recommended by Gizurr. It is merely at the sight of his wife packed and ready to leave that Mörðr ‘suddenly changed his attitude and his language and asked them not to be angry with him and took over the case at once’ (‘skipti þá skjótt skapi sínu ok svá orðum ok bað af sér reidi ok tók þegar við málinu’).¹¹² Greedy, cunning, malicious and scheming as Mörðr is, he also appears capable of loving another being as passionately as ‘the eyes in his own head’. This slightly compromises his villainy, or rather, adds vitality and dynamics that make him credible and engaging. The last scene in which he features in the saga shows him as a good lawyer who prepares his case with care and executes it with dignity. Mörðr escapes the punishment for his many crimes, but the fact that the saga leaves him on a positive note, does not invite an interpretation of Mörðr as a suddenly reformed man either. On both accounts we are spared a sermon. The scene is surprising, but at

¹¹⁰ *Njal's Saga*, p. 168.

¹¹¹ *Njáls saga*, p. 355.

¹¹² *Njal's Saga*, p. 169; *Njáls saga*, p. 356.

the same time consistent with the character's traits of a good lawman, a man capable of bending and reshaping himself under pressure, and ultimately, even if in the most basic and profane sense of the word: a survivor.

Serbian heroic songs do not abound in complex villain characters. These are usually powerful but rather black- and-white opponents, be they medieval lords blamed for the dissolution of the powerful Serbian Empire, or the occupiers – Turks and Arabs, sometimes Hungarians, who capture heroes' wives/sisters, put abhorrent kinds of taxation on the local populace (involving money, food and fresh virgins and brides), or simply compel a hero into the fighting of a duel. Still, there are poems that pay closer attention to their villains, poems that offer some motivation behind villainous actions, or endow the perpetrators with some redeeming qualities.

The first glimpse that we have of Vlah Alija's character (*Banović Strahinja*) is through a devastating report – a letter that Strahinjić Ban receives from his mother while visiting his in-laws. In his long absence, a self-willed mercenary has ravaged his home:

“He took the road that turns off to the south
and then he struck at our town of Banjska,
and he laid waste, my son, to Banjska here
and burned it all with a living fire,
and did not leave a single stone unturned.
He chased away all your faithful servants,
and so he brought grief to your old mother,
he broke her bones under his horse's hooves,
and took away your faithful wife, he did,
and he took her off to Kosovo field.
There he kisses your wife beneath his tent,
and, I, my son, wail in the burned-out home
the while you drink red wine in Kruševac.
May that cursed wine bring the wrath upon you!”¹¹³

[“Окренуо друмом лијевијем,
Те на нашу Бањску ударио,
Те ти Бањску, сине, ојадио
И живијем огњем попалио,

¹¹³ *Banović Strahinja in: Holton and Mihailovich, Songs, p. 112.*

И најдоњи камен растурио,
 Вјерне твоје слуге разагнао,
 Стару мајку твоју ојадио,
 Са коњем јој кости изломлио,
 Вјерну твоју љубу заробио,
 Одвео је у поље Косово,
 Љуби твоју љубу под чадором,
 А ја, сине, кукам на гаришту,
 А ти вино пијеш у Крушевцу!
 Зло ти вино напокоње било!”¹¹⁴

This image of monstrosity, of violent and devious indulgence is reaffirmed by the helpful dervish whom Ban encounters among the Turkish forces on the way to rescue his wife. With best intentions the dervish tries to dissuade Ban from his enterprise, listing the tortures that await him when Alija captures him (this, the dervish thinks, will undoubtedly happen, despite all the esteem he has for Ban’s bravery and prowess). All the more striking is the contrast of the scene in which we actually meet the villain. He is peacefully, if wantonly, stretched in his tent, his head on the lap of Ban’s wife. The singer sees this as an undoubted sign of affection:

How dear she was to him, how much he loved
 that slave of his, Strahinjić’s love and wife!
 He puts his head tenderly on her lap,
 and there she holds strong Vlah Alija’s head.¹¹⁵

[Колико је њему мила била
 Та робиња љуба Страхинова,
 Пануо јој главом на криоце,
 Она држи силна Влах Алију]¹¹⁶

For all the eeriness of the scene, the image slightly shifts from the violence that is reported, to the tenderness that we witness. As Ban’s wife cannot afford to relax, expecting her dire fate to walk in the shape of her husband any minute, she is the first to recognise Ban approaching, but Alija is still in the cheerful mood and teases his new-found love about her fears, laughing them off with the words that even when he

¹¹⁴ Бановић *Страхинја* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 194.

¹¹⁵ Banović *Strahinja* in: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 122.

¹¹⁶ Бановић *Страхинја* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 203.

takes her to his town of Jedrene, she is sure to imagine her husband. What would otherwise be a scene of 'domestic bliss' is burdened with the reader's/the listener's full knowledge of the situation, but this knowledge in turn does not prevent him/her from accessing another side of this villainous character: a cheerful, sociable and a gentler side. When the combat between Ban and Alija reaches the point of deadlock (they have wasted all their weapons and are wrestling wearily and desperately around the field), Ban decides to put their fates into his wife's hands: she is to take a piece of a broken sabre and strike at whomever she pleases. While Ban nobly avoids to influence his wife's decision, Alija has no time for niceties: he consciously preys on her already expressed fears (that Ban has come to gouge her eyes), emphasising the impossibility of her ever being dear to her husband again, and promising in turn all the luxuries imaginable that he will invest her with. The villainous allure with which the case is put before Ban's wife, is still slightly redeemable by the fact that Alija's words are not empty threats and promises, and that it is genuine emotions that fuel Alija's passion. This becomes apparent when the outraged Ban (freshly wounded by his own wife) orders his hound to attack and keep his treacherous love at bay. Alija who should now have a clear advantage over the wounded Ban, is instead grief-stricken by the scene:

And the Turk's eyes almost burst from his head
 he is o'ercome, stricken by great sadness,
 to watch his dear, what's happening to her.¹¹⁷

[Колико му нешто жао бјеше,
 Те он гледа, што се чини шњоме;]¹¹⁸

This is the moment that costs Alija his life. A hardened mercenary that fears no one, not even the Turkish sultan and his viziers, a man capable of trampling over old

¹¹⁷ *Banović Strahinja* in: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 128.

¹¹⁸ *Бановић Страхинја* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 207.

ladies on his horse, a ravager of homes and violator of women, a cruel torturer of his captives, Alija still cannot bear to look at the woman he loves being attacked by a dog and ultimately loses self-control. Even if his love does not redeem his crimes, it still reveals the potential for nobler behaviour in the character and points to the elaborate, sometimes contradictory, psychological processes that drive people's actions. If Vlah Alija does not inspire great admiration, the striking yet transparent (so as not to paint over what is already there) strokes that the singer (Starac Milija¹¹⁹) adds to this character most certainly do.

Banović Strahinja is a striking, but not isolated case of a poem that carefully develops the character of a villain. The paradox that surrounds the hated figure of King Vukašin is powerful and is in effect responsible for the intricacy of this character's portrayal. King Vukašin is one of the most acrimonious medieval lords, held directly responsible in the oral tradition for the factioning and final dissolution of the once powerful Serbian Empire, but at the same time, he is the father of the much-loved Marko Kraljević. In the battle of Kosovo even he is allowed to die a heroic death, and to be avenged by his famous son (*Marko Kraljević Recognises His Father's Sword*). Similarly, a villainous character that succeeds in inspiring some sympathy is most certainly Musa the Highwayman. Not only does he have a credible claim for being a better hero than Marko Kraljević, but there is a clear point at which his and the singer's perspectives merge (if for a moment), and that is their social status, which, though lowly, is something in which they take a lot of pride. In a compelling scene that may be classed as Koljević's 'displacement of moral focus

¹¹⁹ For more on Starac Milija, see chapter 1, pp. 50-61.

found side by side with great imaginative insights', ¹²⁰ Musa refuses to give way to

Marko:

“Pass by, Marko, don’t start any quarrel.
Either pass by, or come and have a drink,
but I am not moving out of the way,
e’en if a queen has given birth to you
in a castle on a deep soft mattress,
and has wrapped you in a pure silk clothing,
and has sewn up your clothes with golden threads,
and has fed you with honey and sugar.
For I was born to a mean Albanian,
beside the sheep on a cold, barren rock;
she wrapped me up all in coarse, black clothing,
and covered me with blackberry offshoots,
and fed me there with cold oatmeal porridge.
It was she who bade me make a firm oath
never to turn aside for any man.”¹²¹

[“Прођи Марко не замећи кавге
Ил одјаши да пијемо вино
А ја ти се уклонити не ћу
Ако т и јест родила краљица
На чардаку на меку душеку
У чисту те свилу завијала
А злаћеном жицом повијала
Одранила медом и шећером
А мене је љута Арнаутка
Код оваца на плочи студеној
У црну ме струку завијала
А купиним лозом повијала
Одранила скробом овсенијем
И још ме је често заклињала
Да се ником не уклањам с пута.”]¹²²

If Musa did not encounter Marko here (and he could not possibly have been allowed to win this duel!), we could easily imagine him as a hero of some other poem.

Even the characters of villains whose very function in an epic narrative readily lends itself to one-dimensional presentation, emerge from the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry as palpable, believable, motivated. As heroic figures become open for criticism, so do the villains exhibit some saving graces, inspire respect and, on occasion, even sympathy.

¹²⁰ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 232.

¹²¹ *Marko Kraljević and Musa the Robber in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 201.

¹²² *Марко Краљевић и Муса Кесеџија in*: Караџић, Vol. II, pp. 191-192.

b) Damsels in distress, or ladies with attitude?

‘Long hair – short of brains’ is an old misogynistic Serbian saying about women. But who would think, judging from this slighting, that so much can depend on long hair and that quite literally? For all the famous terseness of the saga style and the general scarcity of long comparisons and epithets, in *Njáls saga* Hallgerðr’s hair is described with an unusual dose of sensuality: ‘She had lovely hair, so long that she could wrap herself in it’ (‘Hon var fagrhar ok svá mikit hárit, at hon mátti hylja sik með’).¹²³ Hallgerðr seems aware and in control of this asset since she presents it carefully, without overstating it with a complicated hair-dress, but simply, letting her hair hang ‘down on both sides of her breast and [...] tucked under her belt’ (‘[...] en hárit tók ofan á bringuna tveim megin, ok drap hon undir belti sér’),¹²⁴ or when she meets the hero of the saga, Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (her third husband), we are informed that ‘her hair came down to her breasts and was both thick and fair’ (‘hárit tók ofan á bringu henni ok var bæði mikit ok fagrt’).¹²⁵ The apparent emphasis, as in the cited saying, might concern the ornamental function of hair (which I do not mean to slight too, since, for women whose only opportunity for social advancement was to marry well, beauty was likely to be an important asset) but as we reach chapter 77, it becomes apparent that this hair is important not only because it is so remarkably alluring, but because it is on this same hair that the life of a hero such as Gunnarr depends. Attacked in his home, Gunnarr successfully keeps his enemies at bay with his arrows, but the string on his bow breaks, and Gunnarr asks his wife for two locks of her long hair to replace the broken string. For the first time in her life Hallgerðr is fully empowered, her action not requiring to be sanctioned by a male, be that her husband, father, uncle or foster-father. She savours

¹²³ *Njal’s Saga*, p. 13; *Njáls saga*, p. 29.

¹²⁴ *Njal’s Saga*, pp. 19-20; *Njáls saga*, p. 44.

¹²⁵ *Njal’s Saga*, p. 37; *Njáls saga*, p. 85.

the moment, and the dynamics of the action changes pace, the heat of the battle is suspended, as Hallgerðr does not readily sacrifice her hair as it is to be expected, but rather tantalisingly replies to her husband's request with a question:

'Does anything depend on it?' she said.
'My life depends on it,' he said, 'for they'll never be able to get me as long as I can use my bow.'
'Then I'll remind you,' she said, 'of the slap on my face, and I don't care whether you hold out for a long or a short time.'¹²⁶

[“Liggr þér nökkut við?” segir hon. “Líf mitt liggr við,” segir hann, “því at þeir munu mik aldri fá sóttan, meðan ek kem boganum við.” “Þá skal ek nú,” segir hon, “muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr.”]¹²⁷

Hallgerðr decides it is the time to avenge the humiliating (though well deserved from the narrative's point of view) slap she had received from Gunnarr earlier on by denying him this crucial triviality, and, unable to defend himself effectively without his bow, he is soon overpowered by his enemies and killed.

In the poem *The Wedding of King Vukašin*, a hero's life again hangs on the slender threads of a woman's hair. Betrayed by his wife, Vidosava, duke Momčilo's only chance for survival is for his sister to throw some linen over the walls of his fortress, so that he can climb up the city walls and escape his countless enemies led by king Vukašin, Vidosava's paramour. He calls out to his sister, Jevrosima, but she is unable to move as her hair has been firmly fastened on beams by Vidosava:

Yet the sister had pity in her heart,
pity for him, her own brother, the Duke.
She let a cry like a snake in trouble,
she drew her head, and with all her power
she pulled the hair right out of her own head,
leaving her hair hanging on the beams there.
And then she seized an old rug of linen
and she threw it over the city wall.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *Njal's Saga*, p. 89.

¹²⁷ *Njáls saga*, p. 189.

¹²⁸ *The Wedding of King Vukašin in: Holton and Mihailovich, Songs*, p. 94.

[Ал' је сестра срца жалостива,
Жао јој је брата рођенога,
Она цикну, како љута гуја,
Ману главом и осталом снагом,
Из главе је косе ишчупала,
Оставила косе на диреку,
Па довати једну крпу платна,
Претури је граду низ бедене.]¹²⁹

It comes as no great wonder that Jevrosima later becomes the mother of no less than Marko Kraljević himself. Namely, after the rescue fails because Vidosava cuts off the linen and her husband lands on his enemies' lances, the dying duke beseeches Vukašin to learn from his example, and instead of Vidosava to take his sister Jevrosima for a wife. And so it happens. In the epilogue of the poem, it is emphasised that the famous child born from this union, Marko, turned out to be like his uncle, duke Momčilo, rather than his wicked and ignoble father. It would be too much to expect from a patriarchal society to accredit the mother for the hero's prodigious qualities. The poem, however, comes closest to this by assigning these qualities to a male relative from the maternal side, and awarding the female character a scene in which she herself performs a no mean feat by any heroic standards.

In Hallgerðr, Vidosava and Jevrosima, two major medieval literary types can be detected. That of a monstrous and promiscuous female (the biblical parallel for this type is Eve) and that of a saint, or, to incorporate saintliness into the framework of family life that depends on sinful procreation, a saintly mother and a faithful wife (the biblical parallel would be the Virgin Mary). Still, both the saga writers and the epic singers add new features to these models, develop them into three-dimensional figures, offering some motivation for their actions and enlivening them by multi-focal observation. That is why it is so difficult for us to brand Hallgerðr as simply a foul woman, as many people in the saga itself do. We watch her develop and deviate

¹²⁹ *Женидба краља Вукашина in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 88.*

under the burden of her spiritedness in conflict with the binding position as a woman. Her father disregards a very important feature of her character – pride – when he marries her off to a man below her social station (Þorvaldr) without even asking for her consent. This is regarded an error on the part of her father: the fact that on the occasions of her second and third betrothal, he acts on his precocious brother's advice and makes sure that Hallgerðr is consulted, testifies to this. Although this change in treatment is in part due to Hallgerðr's status as a widow that allowed her some independence, Hallgerðr's uncle's (Hrútr) words directed at her father, Höskuldr, affirm that there was something improper about the arrangement of her first marriage:

*“Also, this will not be done as before, with Hallgerd in the dark. She is to know all the terms of the contract now and meet Glum and decide for herself whether or not she wishes to marry him. Then she will not be able to blame others if things do not turn out well. Everything must be free of deceit.”*¹³⁰

[“Skal nú ok eigi svá fara sem fyrr, at Hallgerðr sé leynd; skal hon nú vita allan þenna kaupmála ok sjá Glúm ok ráða sjálf, hvárt hon vill eiga hann eða eigi, ok megi hon eigi öðrum kenna, þó at eigi verði vel; skal þetta allt vélalaust vera.”]¹³¹

Her foster-father's jealousy deprives Hallgerðr of the second husband, the one she seems to have really loved and with whom she had a daughter, and this ordeal scars her. Her third husband, Gunnarr, chooses to put his friend, Njáll, above his wife who was humiliated during a feast by Njáll's wife, Bergþóra. And although the deaths that follow testify to Hallgerðr's cruelty (but Bergþóra's too, for both women engage in a feud with equal passion), they also act as a clear message to Gunnarr that she is quite capable of sorting out her affairs on her own and without his help. It is not only the slap that she avenges at the end, but her general feeling of being betrayed by

¹³⁰ *Njal's Saga*, p. 19, my emphasis.

¹³¹ *Njáls saga*, p. 43, my emphasis.

Gunnarr. Einar Ól. Sveinsson's remark that Hallgerðr also avenges the blows she had received from previous husbands may not be far fetched too.¹³²

Some psychological grounds for Vidosava's treachery are also given. She was heavily tempted by Vukašin whose recognition of Vidosava's loneliness, of her living in the isolation and boredom of a fortress in the wilderness, and whose offering of all luxuries imaginable, as well as plenty of diversions and company, must have resonated deeply with Vidosava's own pains and desires. And even the saintly portrayal of Jevrosima is not without a stain. In the poem *The Building of Skadar* she withholds an important piece of information from her sister-in-law, sending her to certain death in order to save herself. After her performance in which she feigns a headache succeeds, her young and naive sister-in-law agrees to take the midday meal to the men building the city of Skadar (where she will be sacrificed to appease a menacing spirit that during the night destroys the work done by the masons during the day). But before this is done, the young woman asks her sister-in-law for permission to bathe her baby and wash his clothes before she sets off. The singer exploits the tragic potential of the scene to the full by imbuing it with irony between the blessed ignorance of the young woman and the terrible knowledge that we all share. All the more chilling is Jevrosima's 'kind' reply:

“My dear sister, don't tarry; go at once,
and take the men food for their midday meal,
and I will wash your baby's fine, white clothes,
and bathe with care your noble infant son.”¹³³

[“Иди,” каже, “моја јетрвице,
Те однеси мајсторима ручак,
Ја ћу твоје изапати платно,
А јетрва чедо окупати.”]¹³⁴

¹³² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga*, p. 135.

¹³³ *Building of Skadar in*: Holton and Mihailovich, *Songs*, p. 83.

¹³⁴ *Зиданье Скадра in*: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 94.

Not only does she appear as ruthlessly deceptive in exploiting the naiveté of her sister-in-law, but she also fails to be moved by the innocent request, monstrously denying the young woman a last tenderness with her baby. The singer is aware of the respect that tradition has for Jevrosima as the self-effacing sister of duke Momčilo, but even more so as the wise and sagacious mother of Marko Kraljević and he is careful never to name her in this poem. Rather, she is called ‘the queen’ or ‘king Vukašin’s wife’ and this slightly shifts the focus from the loved character, making the vicious queen of Skadar and the wife of a hated lord an entity in itself. However, even as a devoted mother of a great hero, she sometimes tends to assert her authority somewhat capriciously. After arranging a bountiful feast for his *slava*, Marko is shamed by a petty remark of an old monk slighting the feast because fish from the lake Ohrid is not served. In order to fetch some fish, Marko takes a precaution of arming himself, but there his mother comes, a relentless protector of the sanctity of tradition whatever the circumstances, and rather distrustful of her own son:

“My son, Marko Kraljević!
Do not take any of your arms,
You are used to bloodshed, my son,
You will shed some blood on this sacred day too.”
There’s great trouble for Marko!
It is hard to venture unarmed,
even worse to disobey his mother.

[“Ја мој синко, Краљевићу Марко!
Немој носит' ништа од оружја,
Ти се јеси крви научио,
Учинићеш крвцу о празнику.”
Нуто Марку велике невоље!
Мучно му је ићи без оружја,
А још горе не послушат' мајке.”]¹³⁵

Marko’s choice (if there ever was one) to obey his mother nearly leads to his death.

Namely, at the lake Marko meets Đemo of the Mountain, brother of Musa the

¹³⁵ *Марко Краљевић и Ђемо Брђанин in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 294.*

Highwayman, whom we know Marko slew in another poem. Demo is bent on revenge, he plays by the lake by throwing his mace in the air and catching it, plucking up his courage, eager to surprise Marko and his guests by attacking them at the feast and turning it into a bloody affair. He unwittingly discloses this plan to Marko (whom he has never met in person before), and in fear for his guests' safety, Marko reveals himself, hoping to be able to avert the disaster by escape on his famous horse, Šarac. Demo catches the unarmed Marko but is not satisfied with killing him immediately and this gives Marko the opportunity of escaping through his cunning and the help of his foster-sister, innkeeper Janja, who drugs Demo's wine. And, he does indeed bloody his hands on a holy day, just as his mother had predicted. Of course, to have Jevrosima place such a request on Marko adds an extra thrill to the story, as everyone must be interested in what an unarmed hero can do, but it seems imprecise to reduce this character to a particular function – she comes across as palpable and real. She does not resemble a queen to be sure, but is most certainly recognisable as a figure all too familiar to the singer – a dignified old matriarch, at least as headstrong as her famous son.

Despite an inherited attitude of disdain towards women, saga authors and epic singers do not see them as puppets and weaklings. Rather, they appear as capable of matching what is thought to be a typically male kind of heroism. We even see women carrying arms and fighting. On the humiliating offer from Eyjólfur to betray her husband for a bagful of silver, Auðr responds by breaking his nose with the same bag (*Gísla saga*). She stoically stands by her husband's (Gísli) side, helping him enthusiastically during his last battle. Lacking male relatives, it is Þórdís who undertakes to avenge her brother Gísli. Similarly, it is the wife of the imprisoned outlaw Vukosav who takes on his rescue, disguising herself as a young Turkish

officer (which, amongst other things, requires that she cut off her hair!) and demanding from her husband's jailer that he release the outlaw upon penalty of death, since such enemies of the empire need to be the prisoners of the sultan personally. Auðr, Þórdís and Vukosav's wife resemble another familiar figure, another literary type: the warrior maiden. But by no stretch of imagination can they be mistaken for Brunhild, or a Muslim amazon. Rather, the type is cut to fit these ordinary women (if very clever and brave), housewives, whose excursion into the world of men is temporary.

Similar to these are the female characters who die heroic deaths with their husbands, refusing to live in what they perceive as dishonour. Taking up on himself the sin of burning his enemies as an inescapable necessity, Flosi (*Njáls saga*) finds it too hard to bear that the women, children and old men of the household should suffer this horrible fate, so he bids them leave the house. Among them is Njáll's wife, Bergþóra, and after failing to persuade her husband to leave, Flosi personally beseeches Bergþóra to do so:

‘Then you come out, Bergthora, for by no means do I want to burn you in your house.’

Bergthora spoke: “I was young when I was given to Njal, and I promised him that we should both share the same fate.”¹³⁶

[“Gakk þú út, húsfreyja, því at ek vil þik fyrir engan mun inni brenna.” Bergþóra mælti: “Ek var ung gefin Njáli, ok hefi ek því hetit honum, at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði.”]¹³⁷

Although throughout the saga Bergþóra shares some of Hallgerðr's harshness, even cruelty, this is the scene that redeems her in the eyes of the reader, just as the scene of Gunnarr's last stand condemns Hallgerðr, despite the glimpses into her vulnerability and kindness that were afforded in the chapters that describe

¹³⁶ *Njal's Saga*, p. 156.

¹³⁷ *Njáls saga*, p. 330.

Hallgerðr's happy marriage to Glúmr or her generosity to servants in the household of her first husband. By partaking in her revered husband's martyr-like death, Bergþóra partakes in some of his glory too. When her body is discovered after the burning, it is not as radiant as that of Njáll, but it still partakes in the miraculous: it is untouched by the flames.

Similarly, realising that the Turks' long siege of his town is about to prove effective, duke Prijezda decides to render their efforts futile by destroying two out of three symbols of his honour, the very symbols the Turkish sultan is after: his horse and his sabre. The third symbol, or 'treasure' to quote the sultan, is the duke's wife Jelica, and, as she is a living woman, Prijezda does not feel he has the right to take her life. Rather, he lets her choose her fate:

“O, Jelica, my wise lady,
Would you rather die along with me,
or be a faithful love to the Turk?”

[“O Јелице, госпођо разумна!
Или волиш са мном погинути,
Ил' Турчину бити љуба верна?”]¹³⁸

As is to be expected, Jelica chooses to die with her husband, and the epic singer awards her, rather than her husband, the powerful last words that seal the destiny of the tragic couple:

“O, Prijezda, my dear master!
The Morava water nourished us,
let the Morava water bury us.”
Then they leaped into the Morava.

[“O Пријезда, драги господару!
Морава нас вода одранила,
Нек Морава вода и сарани.”
Па скочише у воду Мораву.]¹³⁹

¹³⁸ *Смрт војводе Пријезде in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 359.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 359-360.

These scenes of female heroism draw their power from the fact that death is a free choice – a refusal to live dishonoured lives. This is seen as an admirable aspiration on the part of the woman as honour was supposed to be a typically male concern. Jenny Jochens draws our attention to the fact that the characteristics often praised in a woman in saga literature are more masculine than feminine, and if such a thing as ‘gender blurring’ (in this positive sense) occurs in the sagas it ‘tends in only one direction. One gender, female, was not defined on its own terms and accomplishments, and some of its members were credited with features characteristic of the other’.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, it is the bravery of women resorting to arms, and stoicism as well as the concern with honour of the women choosing to die heroic deaths with their husbands that are praised in both the sagas and the epic poems. We could see how these characters fit the predominantly male discourse. However, although I agree with Jochens that the human ideal to which both genders aspired is indeed more masculine than feminine, I do not think it is entirely true that women were not praised ‘on their own terms’. Rather, I am inclined to agree with Robert Cook who for *Laxdæla saga* maintains that

It is a woman centred saga in a positive sense, exhibiting in rich abundance the ways that women can live and control their destinies. If it can be called a feminist tract, it is of the positive sort that celebrates the ingenuity and effectiveness of women, not of the negative sort that takes the word ‘woman’ to mean ‘person oppressed by a male power system (Vendler 1990)’.¹⁴¹

This view can be extended to other sagas (although *Laxdæla* is indeed a striking example) and epic poems too. In both we find female characters appraised for what

¹⁴⁰ Jochens, Jenny. *Old Norse Images of Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 213. For more on gender blurring in saga literature (on how ‘a physical woman could become a social man’ and vice versa), see Clover, Carol. ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe.’ *Speculum*, 1993. 68, pp. 363-387.

¹⁴¹ Cook, Robert. ‘Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*.’ *Skáldskaparmál*, 1992, 2, p. 57.

they had to master: how to survive as their own persons in a world that is not their own.

Realising that her husband is about to enter a senseless feud with his own half-brother, Jórunn steps in and delivers him a long sobering lecture, succeeding in calming her husband down and averting a disaster bound to hurt all parties. Jórunn defends her brother-in-law's position in the conflict thus showing herself to be a wise woman whose sense of justice is not being biased by her loyalties. Yet she does not come across as a saintly philanthropic pacifier. She is well aware of the practical issues involved and it is her cool reasoning that wins her husband over:

‘I’ve been told that Hrut has secretly exchanged messages with Thord Bellow, which I find very ominous. [...] I think you better do right by your brother Hrut, for a hungry wolf is bound to wage a hard battle. Hrut will, I’m sure, be more than ready to accept an offer of settlement, as I’m told he is no fool. He must see that it would do honour to you both.’¹⁴²

[“[...] því at mér er sagt, at farit muni hafa orðsendingar í hljóði milli þeira Þórðar gellis ok Hrúts; myndi mér slíkir hlutir þykkja ísjáverðir; [...] Nú þætti oss hitt ráðligra, at þú byðir Hrúti, bróður þínum, sœmiliga, því at þar er fangs ván af frekum úlfi; vænti ek þess, at Hrútr taki því vel ok líkliga, því at mér er maðr sagðr vitr; mun hann þat sjá kunna, at þetta er hvárstveggja ykkar sómi.”]¹⁴³

Positive and powerful portrayals of women as women, are not limited to *Laxdæla saga*. Víga-Glúmr's wife, Halldóra, does not prevent the devastating battle of Hrístateigr, but rather moves in after the men finish their bloody business and tries to salvage what is left. She summons up the women in her charge and bids them ‘bind up the wounds of all who can be expected to live, whichever side they’re on’ (“skulum vér binda sár þeira manna, er lífvænir eru, ór hvárra liði sem eru”).¹⁴⁴ The act is indisputably presented as admirable and humane, but, like Jórunn's, it also has

¹⁴² *The Saga of the People of Laxardal in: Örnólfur Thorsson. ed. The Sagas of Icelanders. Keneva Kunz, transl. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 302.*

¹⁴³ *Laxdæla saga. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. Íslensk fornrit, 1934, Vol. V, pp. 47–48.*

¹⁴⁴ *Killer-Glum's Saga, p. 303; Víga-Glúms saga, p. 78.*

a very down-to-earth, rational side, testifying that women in saga literature are not necessarily seen as stereotypically aimless bundles of uncontrollable emotion: tearful damsels in distress, generous peace-makers, or vengeful inciters. Not entirely happy with the outcome of the battle, Víga-Glúmr vents his anxiety on, who else, but his wife, reproaching her for helping his enemies. Composed and sedate, his wife answers that if she did not help his enemy, Þórarinn, it would lead to another feud and yet more bloodshed. This way Þórarinn is bound to them by gratitude. Halldóra's actions were seen as generous, but her capacity to transcend the moment and think forward is praised too.

Serbian epic poems also offer portrayals of women treading the male world and trying to stay true to themselves. In the poem *The Division of the Jakšićes*, Anđelija, the young wife of DMITAR Jakšić, finds herself in the situation of conflicting loyalties. Her husband and brother-in-law successfully divide all their inheritance, all but for a horse and a hawk around which they bitterly quarrel. Angry, DMITAR takes both and goes hunting, leaving his wife with the strict order to either poison his brother, or otherwise not dare to wait for him in their home. The cowardly exit of her husband leaves the young woman in what looks like an insoluble position. Her dilemma is twofold. Obviously, on the one hand, Anđelija is left to choose whether to seal her fate by becoming a murderess, or seal her fate by becoming a scorned, dishonoured woman. The other side of the dilemma concerns her conflicting loyalties, of having to choose between her husband DMITAR and Bogdan, her brother-in-law. Once she leaves the parental home, a young bride in Serbian tradition looks up to her brother-in-law as a substitute for a brother in the new home, a brother who will protect her, if necessary, from her own husband. Cornered by her man's demands and men's rules by which she has to abide, Anđelija still manages to

resolve this extremely difficult situation and this with her own ingenuity, making the system that oppresses her work for her. She honours Bogdan by presenting him with her richly decorated prayer-glass filled with wine, bows in front of him and beseeches him to present her with the horse and the hawk. Deeply moved, Bogdan agrees. Meanwhile, Dmitar's hunt turns sour. The horse breaks his legs and the hawk loses a wing, crowing that the loss of a wing is much easier to bear than the loss of a brother. Dmitar learns his lesson concerning the sacredness of the brotherly bond, but his treatment of Anđelija does not change much. He indeed addresses her as 'dear, faithful love', but this is the kind of formula with which paradoxically, as Maretić¹⁴⁵ notices, even proved adulteresses are occasionally addressed in Serbian epic songs. Rather, Dmitar again refuses to take responsibility for his actions, and this is implied in the manner in which he asks his wife about the outcome of the matter: 'You didn't poison my brother, did you?' The question implies both his fear that whatever the flow of events, it is irreversible now, but it is also tinged with accusation. The sympathies of the singer are with the young woman, and it is she who utters the last words of the poem, enjoying her victory: "I haven't poisoned your brother,/ Instead, I have reconciled you to him" ("Нијесам ти брата отровала,/ Веће сам те с братом помирила").¹⁴⁶

It is not rare in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems that women get awarded some poetic justice, namely they take their revenge on the husbands that mistreat them. After being accused by her husband of cross-dressing, the accusation being sufficient grounds for a divorce that will allow her husband to marry another woman, Auðr (*Laxdæla saga*) indeed dresses up as a man, comes to her ex-husband at night and seriously wounds him. The unfaithful husband chooses not to sue for

¹⁴⁵ Maretić, Tomo. *Naša narodna epika*. Beograd: Nolit, 1966.

¹⁴⁶ *Дујоба Јакшића* in: Караџић, Vol. II, p. 445.

compensation and recognises Auðr's right to avenge herself for the injustice he has inflicted. Similarly, the above mentioned wife of the outlaw Vukosav, rescues her husband by impersonating a Turkish officer, but in order for this to be believable she heaps abuse on her husband, hitting him with her mace and kicking him every now and then. From what is about to follow, one wonders if she enjoyed this part of the rescue best. At a safe distance she reveals herself to her husband but not before she taunts the helpless outlaw by bragging that she (a 'he' in the eyes of unsuspecting Vukosav) is the new lover of his wife. She at first feels compelled to apologise for the kicks, but then, in Hallgerðr's spirit though not with the same consequences, she says: "But I avenged many kicks that I've received from you" ("Е сам многе норе осветила").¹⁴⁷ The episode is set in a safe humorous discourse, but as the old Serbian saying states: in every joke, there is some truth.¹⁴⁸ Justice is justice, even if poetic.

Judith Jesch rightly warns that the portrayals of strong women in saga literature should not lead us to romanticise the position of women in the Viking Age who most certainly 'suffered the physical perils of hard work, childbirth, male violence and slavery'.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, the wife of the outlaw Vukosav could hardly be imagined assaulting her husband, or finding herself in the position of the rescuer in the first place, in a society that, according to Jovan Brkić, under the influence of Islam, 'considered it a matter of great shame (sram) and reprehension (zazor) if women looked at or addressed their husbands, or if girls looked at or addressed men in general'.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, Brkić overlooks the respect that Serbian patriarchal culture had for the matriarchal figure. Marko, as we have seen, may be a great hero, fierce and with fiery temper, but he has to obey his mother without questioning.

¹⁴⁷ *Љуба хајдук-Вукосава* in: Караџић, Vol. III, p. 254.

¹⁴⁸ 'U svakoј šali ima istine' – the English equivalent could be: 'Many a true word is spoken in jest', but since there is a subtle difference in meaning, I opted for the literal translation above.

¹⁴⁹ Jesch, Judith. *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991, p. 208.

¹⁵⁰ Brkić, *Moral Concepts*, p. 95.

Besides, it does not look like a coincidence that in Serbian epic poetry women as a rule do address their husbands:

“O my master, [...]
I am ashamed even to look at you,
let alone have a word or two with you.
I have no choice, I will speak to you now.”¹⁵¹

[“Господине, [...]
Зазор мене у те погледати,
А камо ли с тобом говорити,
Бит’ не може говорити хоћу.”]¹⁵²

The compulsory ‘apology’, only underscores the serious things that usually follow, as the addressed ‘master’ soon learns that his wife’s words were not spoken in vain.

We should, perhaps be equally wary of over-emphasising women’s oppressed position. To paraphrase the famous French poet, Paul Valéry: tight shoes make one invent new dances. In every oppressive circumstance, people have shown themselves capable of finding their own niche, their own ways of expressing and asserting themselves and it is hard to think of women as an exception. Besides, as Carol Clover points out, the sagas (and Serbian epics) featuring strong female characters precisely hinge ‘on the discrepancy between what women *ought* to do and what they *really* do. Remove the discrepancy and you have no story.’¹⁵³

Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems are full of extraordinary ordinary women who, indeed, accept the fact that they are living in a man’s world, but if they do not clash with it directly, are far from being meek and obedient. Although in both the sagas and Serbian epics the familiar types, ranging from one extreme (a monstrous temptress like Vidosava or the Norwegian queen Gunnhildr) to the other

¹⁵¹ *The Building of Ravanica in: Holton and Mihailovich, Songs*, p. 103, my emphasis.

¹⁵² *Зиданье Раванице in: Караџић, Vol. II*, p. 147.

¹⁵³ Clover, Carol. ‘The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia’ in: Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olson, eds. *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 101.

(the saintly virgin figure of Jevrosima and of a righteous faithful wife such as Bergþóra) are employed, they are vastly expanded upon, resulting in some complex portrayals. They point to their characters' psychological intricacy, and as a result, these characters breathe with vitality, make their presence felt. Distinctly a 'male genre', epic is, however, in both cultures nurtured in a relatively intimate circle of family, with both men and women as an eagerly interested audience. Furthermore, considering that some of the best singers of Serbian epics were women, and that at least for *Laxdæla saga* there are grounds to suspect that the writer was a woman,¹⁵⁴ it might not be so surprising that some crucial moments in the sagas/epics were awarded to women. Even if their long hair was occasionally allowed to eclipse the glory of their heroic husbands and brothers, we are never led to believe that this was due to women's shortage of brains.

c) 'Common people': fifteen minutes of fame

In this section we turn to the most unobtrusive of supporting roles, characters that almost sneak into the narratives – 'ordinary' or 'common' people, servants and slaves. They are not in direct connection with the world of the hero such as the two groups of supporting roles I have examined earlier: they neither act as the hero's adversaries nor do they inspire romantic interest. Yet, servants and slaves in many ways account for the air of realism that imbues both the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems. We encounter them in the setting of their prosaic daily activities, their world only temporarily brushing with that of the hero. Unsurprisingly, these characters very often adhere to certain literary types (cowardly/crafty/stupid slaves, faithful servants...) or could be seen in terms of

¹⁵⁴ See chapter 1, p. 34.

Proppian functions (providers of comic relief, voices of public opinion, catalysts...).¹⁵⁵ Some of them are almost entirely reduced to their function in the text: they are a part of the setting. These are so called 'stock characters' with their stock professions and stock names. Bayerschmidt¹⁵⁶ notes that 'Sóti' is a common name for the villainous pestering viking, while Koljević jokingly refers to Rade the Mason as the one 'who has built all that was worth building in epic medieval Serbia'.¹⁵⁷

However, in comparison with other European epic medieval literatures, the sagas/epics offer a wealth of memorable servant and slave characters with their distinct and sharp features. As is the case with all the groups of characters that are examined here, types are used, but more than occasionally, these types function as a base to build upon. When plucked out of their cardboard existence and enlivened, 'common people' characters are often easier for the reader to identify and sympathise with than heroes: they are easier to perceive as 'one of us'. If in the interactions with adversaries heroes show their martial ability, it is often in interactions with the lowly figures of servants and slaves that a hero's humanity is tested. In this section we are going to observe the interplay between 'typical' and 'idiosyncratic' in these characters.

With the sardonic remark: "Slaves are more active than they used to be" ("Miklu eru þrælar atgerðameiri en fyrr hafa verið"),¹⁵⁸ Skarpheðinn turns the stereotype of the cowardly slave into a powerful tool of irony. It is not directed at the slaves and servants, but at his peace-loving father. In other words, if slaves, cowardly as they are supposed to be, concern themselves with matters of family honour more than the members of family themselves, what does that make Njáll and his sons if not

¹⁵⁵ See Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

¹⁵⁶ Carl Bayerschmidt makes this observation in his introduction to *Njáls saga*. (See Bayerschmidt, Carl and Lee M. Hollander, transl. *Njáls saga*, New York: New York University Press, 1955, p. 366.)

¹⁵⁷ Koljević, *The Epic*, p. 146.

¹⁵⁸ *Njal's Saga*, p. 44; *Njáls saga*, p. 98.

the worst imaginable cowards? As Vésteinn Ólason points out: ‘The cowardice and essential lack of nobility amongst the slaves and servants is not in itself unheroic, for no-one should expect heroism from such lowly people’.¹⁵⁹ But if this is the established *horizon of expectations* concerning servants and slaves, transgression against it bears an element of surprise. As a result, memorable characters emerge.

Unable to trust her corrupt and cowardly husband (a chieftain, to make things worse) with the life of her kinsman, Vigdís turns to her slave Ásgautr for help. In the initial description of Ásgautr (‘loyal’/ ‘kunni’, ‘large’/ ‘mikill’, ‘capable’/ ‘gørviligr’) we are told that ‘[...] though he was called a slave, there were few of those called free men who could regard themselves as his equals’ (‘[...]þótt hann væri þræll kallaðr, þá máttu fáir taka hann till jafnaðarmanns við sik, þótt frjálsir hétu’).¹⁶⁰ We bear witness to the veracity of this description in the following chapters in which Ásgautr conducts Vigdís’s kinsman to safety, showing himself not only loyal to his mistress, but also exceptionally brave. For his service Ásgautr is awarded freedom and money with which he starts a new life in Denmark where, we are informed, he ‘was considered a capable and decent fellow’ (‘þótti hraustr drengur’).¹⁶¹ Similar properties and fates are shared by Ingjaldr’s slaves, Svartr and Bóthildr (*Gísli saga*). Ingjaldr lives on an island in the isolation of which he harbours his cousin, the famous outlaw Gísli. When Gísli’s enemies approach in their boat, the island becomes a trap. Instead of facing them and dying, or letting himself be hunted down while hiding like an animal, Gísli chooses to outwit his enemies and escape the fatality right in front of their noses. For his plan to work, the two slaves prove indispensable. Rather unheroically, Gísli bids the male slave change clothes with him, ultimately making him a target. With the change of clothes, the reversal of roles

¹⁵⁹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 162.

¹⁶⁰ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 286; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 21.

¹⁶¹ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 296; *Laxdæla saga*, p. 37.

occurs: a slave is left to do the heroic part, while the hero makes a slavish, cowardly escape. Gísli then takes upon himself another role regularly assigned to slaves, the role of a stupid fool and in order to carry this deception out, Gísli, again in an ironic reversal of roles, has to rely on wit and resourcefulness as well as the rowing skills of another slave, this time the slave-woman Bóthildr. After he changes clothes with Svartr, Gísli jumps into the boat with Bóthildr and while she rows, he impersonates Ingjaldr's idiotic son, Helgi. When the little boat approaches the powerful vessel of Gísli's enemies, the men cross-examine Bóthildr about Gísli's whereabouts and her answers and casual conduct delude them. She even seemingly sulks and complains that they shamefully amuse themselves with the fool, and do not feel sorry for the troubles she endures while having to take care of the idiot. While the unsuspecting men continue to row towards the island, Bóthildr rows towards the shore and conducts Gísli to safety. For this, both Bóthildr and Svartr get their freedom, as well as a praise from the hero.

The stories about slave/servant bravery do not always have happy endings. When Njáll's dexterous servant Þórðr is introduced into the saga (*Njáls saga*) he is highly praised. We are seemingly casually informed that his wife is pregnant, but it is precisely against this fact and Þórðr's repeated statements: "I am not a killer" ("Ekki em ek vígamaðr"),¹⁶² that the tragic glory of his death and the monstrosity of Hallgerðr and Bergþóra's feud will be measured. Although Þórðr is 'not a killer', once he agrees to act on his mistress's behalf, he does that as thoroughly as any other job he is entrusted with: he kills Hallgerðr's servant Brynjólfur. For this he dies a martyr-like death, outnumbered, without the warrior training of his killers, but with much more courage.

¹⁶² *Njal's Saga*, p. 47; *Njáls saga*, p. 103.

Although unexpected, nobility and courage are shown by the ‘lowly’ characters of servants and slaves in the sagas and this is what transforms a faded type into a memorable figure. It is this same surprising transformation that distinguishes some of the servant characters in Serbian epics. Contrary to Icelandic slaves/servants, their Serbian counterparts are expected to mirror some of their master’s courage. But a servant’s courage is not present for its own sake; it is important in so far as it is a sign of loyalty, the most commendable characteristic of a servant. When Tsaritsa Milica, informed by two ravens about the tragic outcome of the Kosovo battle and her husband’s death, sees servant Milutin (wounded but still alive), her first concern is to establish Milutin’s status regarding his loyalty to Tsar Lazar: “Milutin! What is this? For pity’s sake –/ Have you betrayed your Tsar at Kosovo?”¹⁶³ (“Што је, болан! слуго Милутине?/ Зар издаде цара на Косову?”¹⁶⁴). The formulaic expression: ‘faithful servant’ testifies to the fact that loyalty is the very essence of the servant characters.

The ‘twist’ that takes servant characters in Serbian epics beyond the type does not involve a faithful servant becoming an unfaithful one, but rather, the servant is allowed to have a different concept of ‘faithfulness’ from his master, and this concept usually proves to be morally superior. In the poem *Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Milica*, Milica persuades her husband to excuse one of her brothers from participating in the battle, so that she is not left all alone, without comfort. After Tsar Lazar watches her faint after her pleas fail with each of the nine brothers, he orders servant Goluban to stay with his mistress. To this command he adds his blessings and absolves Goluban from the curse he has previously laid on all men failing to participate in the fateful battle.

¹⁶³ *Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa in: Locke, Ballads*, p. 175.

¹⁶⁴ *Цар Лазар и царица Милица in: Караџић, Vol. II*, p. 213.

When Goluban heard what the Tsar had said
 He wept, and tears flowed down his cheeks;
 But he obeyed the Tsar. Dismounting from
 His battle-horse, he took the lady's hand
 And led her to a peaceful room inside.
 But in the servant's heart there was no peace,
 That he alone should not go to the war.
 He fled away to where his horse was stood
 And, mounting, turned and rode to Kosovo.¹⁶⁵

[Кад то зачу слуга Голубане,
 Проли сузе низ бијело лице,
 Па одсједе од коња лабуда,
 Узе госпу на бијеле руке,
 Однесе је на танану кулу;
 Ал' свом срцу одољет' не може,
 Да не иде на бој на Косово,
 Већ се врати до коња лабуда,
 Посједе га, оде у Косово.]¹⁶⁶

As the passage shows, Goluban's first impulse is to obey his master, but after he has taken emergency care of his mistress, he effectively disobeys; his personal sense of duty prevails. It is not the Tsar's curses Goluban fears; it is his own conscience.

In the poem *Stefan Musić* the servant Vaistina ('verity') refuses his lady's desperate pleas (she has had an ominous dream) not to wake his master up in order to go to Kosovo. The lady calls Vaistina her brother by God and Saint John. It is extremely rare in Serbian epic poetry that a plea should be refused after this. The fact that Vaistina does precisely this in order to stay true to his master Stefan and the Tsar places an enormous moral significance on his choice. He accepts his lady as a sworn sister, yet refuses to obey her. He feels the burden of the Tsar's curse and he shares that with his new sister, reminding her of her own duty. The phrase: "[...] I can not/ Be faithless to my master and to yours"¹⁶⁷ ("[...] ја не смем невере чинити/ господару и моме и *твоме*"¹⁶⁸), he repeats twice. The servant is not a passive figure

¹⁶⁵ *Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa in: Locke, Ballads*, p. 173.

¹⁶⁶ *Цар Лазар и царица Милица in: Караџић, Vol. II*, p. 212.

¹⁶⁷ *Stefan Musich in: Locke, Ballads*, p. 185, my emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ *Мусић Стефан in: Караџић, Vol. II*, p. 218, my emphasis.

here: if he is faithful, it is by his freedom of choice. What is more, the master's honour is his own honour too, and if he sees his (in this case her) moral judgment going astray, he feels it is his duty to try and set it right. These concerns that servants have about the honour of their masters often figure in Icelandic sagas. Servants frequently act as inciters: they know how to make their masters act. However, these acts are generally viewed negatively, as, unlike Vaistina's, they are usually motivated by malice rather than loyalty, and are carried out by troublemakers, like the gossiping brothers Þorvaldr and Þórhallr in *Thorstein Staff-struck*.

In the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry a transgression against our *horizon of expectations* regarding the recognisable literary figure of a 'faithful servant' or a slave occurs, as these become graced with certain idiosyncratic and unexpected features. Just as the dynamic between the aristocratic and the democratic ethos in medieval Iceland and Serbia after the Ottoman conquest facilitated the saga writers' and singers' 'domestication' of heroic characters, it has also endowed the 'common people' characters with some *uncommon* heroic properties. Not only do heroic figures such as Marko and Grettir provide some of the comic relief (hence encroaching upon the territory previously occupied by the lowly figures), but if only for a moment, servants in Serbian epics and slaves in the sagas are allowed to outshine their noble masters in courage or are given the moral high-ground.

* * *

To experience a thing as real is, according to Michael Polanyi, 'to feel it has the independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the

future'.¹⁶⁹ Such are the complex characters in the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry: valiant yet comical, resolved yet reluctant combatants, courageous yet pragmatic, fierce yet gentle heroes; foul yet starkly honest, wicked yet vulnerable villains; manly women and womanly men, sinful angels and virtuous monsters, noble slaves and slavish nobles. These contradictory characteristics that breathe life into them are not all necessarily imparted to them by a particular (however excellent) mind; rather, the characters accumulated them during their long evolutionary journeys in which they were required to transform and adapt to different audiences. It is thence that they draw their power of surprise, their independence and their realism.

¹⁶⁹ Polanyi, Michael in: Rheinberger, Hans-Jörg. *Toward a History of Epistemic Things*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 23.

V

Towards the *Poetics of Complexity* of the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry

In an attempt to summarise the underlying creative principles of the two literatures discussed in this study, I find the term Torfi Tulinius applies in relation to the sagas, the ‘poetics of complexity’,¹ particularly apt. At the same time, I do not entirely share his views as to how the sagas acquire their complexity. The more explicit way in which for him the complexity is reflected in (‘at least the longer’) sagas concerns their formidable structures, i.e. their ‘multiple subplots with extensive ramifications, a profusion of references difficult to fathom, and a large cast of characters [...]’.² The word ‘complex’ is here used in its more everyday meaning, as a synonym for ‘complicated,’ and in this respect, the sagas’ elaborate structure is the more superficial way in which this literature could be considered complex. From the perspective of the sciences of complexity on the term (which I discussed in chapters one and two), the difference between ‘complicated’ and ‘complex’ is an important one: for all the amazing attention to detail and ingenuity that goes into building an airplane – a conglomerate, complicated system consisting of an enormous number of intricate parts – it would still be considered an extraordinary feat of engineering endeavour to come up with a flying machine that is anything as resilient, economical and flexible as a truly complex, non-linear system such as a dragonfly. In other words, while the complicated system (or an object, e.g. a snowflake) often has the appearance of the complex system, the relationships between its numerous elements

¹ Torfi H. Tulinius. *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in 13th-century Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press, 2002, p. 266.

² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

are fixed; there is no adaptivity to the changes in the environment, no self-organisation, no evolution. In their being a part of the tradition, undergoing numerous oral and manuscript renderings at any one time (synchronic) and over extensive periods of time (diachronic), both the elaborate sagas of Icelanders and the significantly shorter Serbian epic poems have something in common with dragonflies – rather than being ‘engineered’, they evolve and so gain not merely complicated, but complex structures.

Another way in which the sagas are complex and which comes closer to how I view the complexity of the sagas and Serbian epics is, for Torfi Tulinius, reflected in the manner in which the sagas convey ‘the complexity of human existence, with its many dimensions – social, emotional and economic’,³ as well as in what he considers the sagas’ obscurity, ambiguity, the multiplicity of interpretations that they lend themselves to, the fact that, like another highly accomplished Scandinavian literary genre, skaldic verse, sagas ‘invite interpretations that include several meanings at a time, or on multiple levels’.⁴ Where I again do not share Torfi Tulinius’s views is in the reasons he provides for this state of affairs. The anxiety to divest his usage of ‘complex’ from another (this time, unwelcome) connotation, ‘chaotic’ (the sagas are complex but ‘not an inchoate jumble’⁵) on one hand, and the desire to accredit *someone* with the sagas’ artistic accomplishment (so that it is not perceived as accidental or arbitrary) on the other, lead Torfi Tulinius to underplay the role that tradition and evolutionary processes acting on oral and oral-derived literatures have in generating and preserving the ambiguities, discrepancies, multi-layeredness, as well as the sagas’ famous ‘lacunary and hermetic nature’.⁶ Rather, the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

ambiguity and complexity one encounters in the sagas are considered to be solely the domains of talented individuals, which further leads to overemphasising the significance that the saga writers would themselves have given to complexity, both concerning their supposed intention to ‘mystify the reader’,⁷ and their premeditated, ‘crafted complexity’.⁸

From the complexity theory’s point of view, a ‘crafted complexity’ constitutes a contradiction in terms: the complexity of a system (in this case – the tradition, or a saga/ an epic poem as a system within a system) cannot be made; it can only *emerge*, Paul Cilliers argues, ‘as a result of the patterns of interaction between the elements’.⁹ What characterises a complex system is the fact that none of its elements (Serbian epic singers, saga writers/tellers/scribes and their respective audiences) is fully aware of the whole, and that, however creative, however ingenious, the contribution of each element is also always local: no one holds the strings of the whole system (i.e. tradition in general, and any saga/ epic poem in particular). In chapter two of this study I have suggested that the complex texture (ambiguity, multidimensionality, Bakhtinian *heteroglossia*) of traditional literatures such as the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems owes much to their ‘distributed representation’, the non-linear dynamics of their coming into being that involves networks of authors at a particular time, and over extensive periods, the dynamics I called the distributed author.

The argument that there is a creativity in traditional literature taking place at the level beyond an individual potentially brings into question the importance of the uniqueness and talent of particular singers/saga writers. What one needs to be aware

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁹ Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 5.

of, however, is that, unlike with elements in just any set (e.g. a wall comprising uniform bricks), in a complex system a diversity of elements is of crucial importance. Richard J. Eiser gives an excellent illustration:

Forests consist of trees, but the individual trees in the forest can still be very different from one another. One can look at a forest, and go into it, and find ever more detail the closer one looks. To find such interpolated complexity does not make it any less a forest. (Indeed, the more 'natural' the forest the more complexity we will find.) The collectivities that emerge naturally from the coordination of their constituent parts do not abolish such complexity or impose mere uniformity – indeed they require the constituents to retain their individual characteristics.¹⁰

For a forest to truly look like a forest, it is important that the trees are different, and the difference is achieved by each tree responding to its surroundings in a unique way: twisting and sprouting branches relative to the position of the sun, other trees and lower growths, atmospheric conditions, presence of minerals and water in the soil, parasites, the forest fauna, etc. It is not the multiplicity in itself but this dynamic of variety that matters; without it, the forest would look like a freakish amalgam of clones that one could generate in the computer by multiplying a picture of one and the same tree many times over. As Eiser further points out:

Groupness emerges not from the fact that more than one individual is involved, but that they are involved *together*. This togetherness does not require sameness, but it does demand interconnectedness.¹¹

That it is a network of interconnected singers and saga writers/tellers/scribes that is responsible for creating an epic poem or a saga does not mean that the contributions of particular individuals average one another out. Rather, these compete and negotiate, and some indeed turn out to be more significant in the development of a traditional narrative than others. At the same time, what contribution precisely will

¹⁰ Eiser, Richard J. *Attitudes, Chaos and the Connectionist Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995, p. 218.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

turn out significant and in what way will it be significant can never be told in advance. As was discussed in the example of two very talented singers, Starac Milija and Filip Višnjić,¹² all this depends on an intractable number of variables in the environment, and even the *a posteriori* speculations and projections are inconclusive as they are always relative to the observed moment, a moment in which a traditional work of art can only be but an instance of its distributed self. Indeed, the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems available to us today, are precisely that – instances, or ‘synchronic snapshots,’ and so it is the last contributor’s stamp that is most intensely felt. But even in this frozen state an array of already sedimented attitudes to past events and characters enters into a dialogue (sometimes more compliant, sometimes more confrontational) with those of the last maker, creating an effect of an unsettled upon, unfinished, and hence also an unmediated account. In always adapting to the present needs of a community, traditional narratives undergo the process of cumulative aesthetic selection, in which voices and intentions of particular contributors (whether to ‘mystify the reader,’ impress him/her with an ability to create Barthesian ‘l’effet de réel,’ teach him/her particular morals, or achieve something else) get scrambled through time, become overlaid with voices and intentions of others. At any one time a singer or a saga teller/writer/scribe either adds to or takes away from what is already there in the tradition: the story always precedes its teller. This situation renders the possibility of an imposing biased perspective harder, and so makes the account *come across* as believable – whatever the degree of ‘historical truth’ within it may be.

The evolutionary processes that have created our sense for what the texture of reality feels like (and hence we distinguish between a ‘natural forest’ and ‘a

¹² See chapter 2, pp. 105-106.

computer amalgam of cloned trees'), a texture that defies purpose and generally appears 'messier' than that produced by 'sensible designers,'¹³ dexterous engineers, or visionary authors, participate in creating traditional narratives too. Thus, like living things with their appendices, and growths, subtle asymmetries, utilised and unutilised remnants of their previous stages of development, traditional works of verbal art have the potential for unpremeditated ambiguities and multidimensionality, for narrative loose ends and contradictions, cross-currents, uncertainties and friction, that Erich Auerbach¹⁴ points to as crucial for an account to be experienced as believable, 'realistic.' However, whether this potential will be realised or not, and to what extent, depends on whether the evolutionary dynamics of the distributed author is supported by the socio-historical environment to remain distributed (as is the case with the *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme*), or whether it is hijacked and channelled by the Bakhtinian 'centripetal forces',¹⁵ as was the case with the majority of great (and hence recorded!) traditions of medieval Europe's cultural centres. These forces (the centralised state, court, Church) compromise ('monologise') the non-linear dynamic of traditional narratives by taking on the role of the overseer of the creative process, 'weeding' the narrative ambiguities and discrepancies out, creating an effect of directedness very much akin to the authorial agency of an individual. As a result, as was discussed in chapter two, two very closely related oral traditions such as Serbo-Croatian Muslim and Serbo-Croatian Christian traditions (with reference to common historical events and usage of a common word hoard) produce two profoundly different kinds of epics, as do two highly developed literate cultures such as that of medieval France and medieval Iceland.

¹³ See Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker*. London: Penguin, 1986, p. 92.

¹⁴ Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 19. See also chapter 1, pp. 68-81.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 271-272. See also chapter 2, pp. 133-139.

The weakness in medieval Iceland and post-Ottoman-conquest Serbia of the centripetal forces that direct art production endorsed the Icelandic sagas' and Serbian epics' distributed nature, the nature inherent in the dynamics of their networked, negotiated authorship and their evolution. Moreover, the socio-historical forces in the two literatures' cultural milieus added a further centrifugal spin to the development of the sagas/Serbian epics. The traditionally aristocratic genre of epic was in both cultures democratised, transplanted from its feudal roots and made to adapt to the needs of farming communities facing an uncertain and unsettling future, while the subjugation of Serbia and the pending surrender of Iceland's independence to the Norwegian crown did not facilitate an unconditioned, triumphalist perspective on past events and characters that one comes across in most epics. This has inaugurated a lively set of dynamics of both generic (between 'high'/'low' genres; tragic/comic modes) and ideological kind (between aristocratic/democratic ethos; 'winner'/'loser' attitudes), the dynamics that support the evolutionary aesthetics inherent in traditional media, and that together give rise to the sagas' and Serbian epics' famous realism.

While chapters one and two of this study deal with theoretical and aesthetic implications of the two literatures' distributed authorship and their emergent realism, chapters three and four illustrate (through close reading) the ways in which these are manifested in the rich texture of the past and the complex make-up of characters in the *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme*. Just as other stories of community origins, both the Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics hark back to a glorious past, a 'golden age' of national prosperity (the Settlement of Iceland/ Tsar Dušan's Empire) with nostalgia, yet, at the same time, this past is far from being statically venerated. On the contrary, for all its splendour and magnificence, it is held accountable for the

turbulent present, with the seeds of discord being sown not by some external overpowering sources of evil, but being present from the outset. While graced with some of the noblest characteristics both as a liege and as a person (a great conqueror, a just and merciful ruler, a gentle, loving parent), Tsar Dušan the Mighty also exhibits profound flaws on both accounts: he attempts to marry his own sister, succumbs to slander and has his innocent foster-son put to death, slights his kinsmen, sins against his patron saint and against God. The founder of the Serbian Empire, he is also the source of great corruption that brings about its demise. At the same time, Dušan is not alone in this: the internal quarrels and power struggles, intrigues, hypocrisy and greed of the powerful and self-willed magnates to whose schemes not even as wise a ruler as Dušan is immune, also contribute to the dissolution of the Empire. As the Ottoman Turks appear on the epic horizon, the magnificent edifice of the Serbian Empire is already all worm-eaten and ready to topple.

The 'golden age' story of Iceland's beginnings is of a similarly problematic and a peculiar sort. The tyranny of Haraldr Finehair as the motivating factor for the freedom-loving, enterprising people to leave their native Norway, venture into a 'brave new world' where they will settle and build a state of equals, is cast in relief by an array of attitudes that question each point of this apparently causally tight account. Haraldr's supposed tyranny is problematised both in its own right and as the reason for emigration. In a number of sagas he is also portrayed as a generous and wise ruler, a good friend, a unifier of Norway and the source of opportunities and advancement for a host of people seeking glory and wealth. The love of freedom has made some people stay and fight for it rather than flee to Iceland, and some fled not because they sought freedom from a tyrant, but a refuge from justice and retribution for the criminal offences they had committed in the old country. The riches and

appeal of the 'brave new world' are given clear limitations, as both the land and its resources soon run in short supply, while, with no king and no central executive power, the state of free farmers relies on feud as a regulative/punitive system and the only means of enforcing the rulings made at the Althing. The cyclical and escalating nature of feud as well as its rigid codes that force close kin to take opposite sides and people who have no direct quarrel fight one another, eventually lead the society of equals towards self-destruction. In the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic songs, these competing perspectives accreted through time encroach upon one another, traverse, enter a vigorous dialogue and hence produce arresting and vivid images of the past.

With no centripetal social forces strong enough (or having a stake in) maintaining the purity of the high genre of epic, with vassalage in Serbia and pending subordination of Iceland demanding a reinterpretation of fundamental heroic concepts such as honour and courage, both the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poems abound in a new breed of heroes. Valliant and noble, they are, unlike their European predecessors – Beowulf, Roland, Siegfried – given more obvious flaws, flaws that perhaps detract something from their heroism, but also make them more human. The greatest hero of Serbian epics, Marko Kraljević, and the cleverest Icelandic outlaw and a poet, Grettir the Strong, inherit the skill, stamina (and even some caprice) of their epic and mythic predecessors, but also gain the sly peasant sense of humour, wit, and the survivalist pragmatism that will occasionally push them to take to their heels rather than fight. A proud medieval dynast, a prince, the stalwart fighter against injustice and cruelty of the high and mighty, a hero easily moved by suffering of others, Marko will also try his hand at being the Sultan's champion and a mercenary, at outlawry, raiding, even at ploughing (albeit that this

involved Turkish roads, rather than fertile valleys). He wins his duels by his prowess and his mace (his 'cool red wine' too), but also by resorting to trickery, or even relying on his noble steed and *vila* blood-sisters to get him out of trouble. Similarly shaded and palpable is the character of Grettir the Strong. Prodigiously endowed (though, as the comic episode with the servant girl suggests, not in all departments!) and prone to showmanship of his heroic aptitude, Grettir is at the same time incredibly clear-sighted as to just how many enemies he is ready to take on (four – surprisingly few by epic standards), and is quite aware that the battles are rarely won by brawn alone. A rogue with rather ambiguous morals, he is also capable of gentleness, appreciating virtues in others, and is able to laugh at himself.

The heroes' fallibility, their infringement on the roles of traditionally 'lower' characters from comedy and satire have in turn created room for the characters supporting the action to take on some characteristics that normally fall within the domain of heroes, gain more prominence and more idiosyncratic features. As heroes exhibit some potential for villainy, so do villains gain some noble characteristics, or at least show redeeming qualities; as heroes occasionally act as buffoons (the role reserved for servants and slaves), so do servants and slaves occasionally act as heroes and show moral superiority over their hero masters. Women who are in most epics reduced to a particular set of (often rather passive) functions are in the sagas and Serbian epics given more importance and more diverse roles. Even though they inhabit distinctly male worlds, they manage their situation with grace and skill, find ingenious ways of transcending their oppressed position, and, on occasion, even succeed in eclipsing the warrior glory of their heroic husbands, brothers and fathers. It is through the dynamic of varied and not always complementary or harmonised

features that the characters in the Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics come across as realistic.

Although the concepts of distributed author and emergent realism were specifically developed in order to study the peculiar similarities in the complex poetics of the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry, it is hoped, nevertheless, that they might find further use in the studies of oral and oral-derived literatures in general. While, on the one hand, the distributed author and emergent realism represent novel means of envisaging the way traditional narratives come into being (as distributed objects evolving within synchronic and diachronic authorial networks), they could, on the other hand, also be employed as interpretative and theoretical tools, both in consideration of traditional texts' evolutionary aesthetics and relating to the question of who is speaking in traditional narratives. The use of the terms would be further confirmed if the comparatists working with oral and oral-derived verbal art were to come up with more heroic literatures of the cultural margins that have developed under similarly unfettered evolutionary processes as the sagas and Serbian epics, and test whether they also exhibit the representational complexity of the kind found in the two literatures discussed here.

Studies of modern literary texts potentially also have a stake in utilising the distributed author and the emergent realism, especially when the fortuitous, procedural aspect of the creative writing process is concerned, or when well-known (but largely unexplored) phenomena such as 'the work taking over,' or writers achieving 'more than they are capable of' are in question.

L.P. Hartley famously states: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'.¹⁶ As artefacts of past times, narratives arrested in their

¹⁶ Hartley, Leslie P. *The Go-Between*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953, p. 9.

evolutionary development, and products of traditions to whose membership we do not subscribe, *Íslendingasögur* and *srpske junačke pesme* will always have some of the aura of the foreign, alien. It is, however, through their poetics of complexity, their texture of reality, that the two literatures also remain familiar and fresh, become contemporary.

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